

## **BILL HARDEN'S INTERVIEW:**

### **A Stand-out Worker for Environmental Justice**

*(This is the first in a series of interviews of CfET's Board members, intended to bring the human faces of those working and organizing to further our mission in Waterfront South. Look for more of these in future website updates.)*

The Center for Environmental Transformation (CfET), tucked into an urban street next to Sacred Heart Church's rectory in South Camden, New Jersey, was born and continues to grow and prosper with the help of many generous volunteers. Among those are several dedicated, visionary "missionaries" of environmental justice in the form of our Board of Directors. Bill Harden, a Haddon Township resident, found the parish and our Center through a series of serendipitous events, and is and continues to be a valuable asset to our organization. I recently interviewed Bill so readers can view the human side of what keeps the work of the CfET growing and thriving in our Waterfront South Camden community.



**CfET: What brought you here to the Center for Environmental Transformation, Bill? I know you and your wife began selling fair trade coffee a few years back as a way to expose our new Center to the parish and the community. Tell us how that started and why you came to Sacred Heart in Camden, particularly.**

**BILL:** It was actually an event sponsored by the parish's Peace Community that first brought me to Sacred Heart. The timing was especially good, though, because our old parish was in the midst of a merger that didn't appeal to us. Once we "discovered" Sacred Heart and attended a few Masses, we knew we had found the parish where we belonged.

**CfET: Bill, all kinds of people with varying backgrounds make up the Center's organization and board. Tell us something about Bill Harden before you came here? Was environmental justice and urban social change what drew you to join Camden's efforts?**

**BILL:** I believe I first heard about the CfET in the Sacred Heart parish bulletin. My wife and I still had one foot in our old parish and were very active in their social justice ministry. Then, I happened to meet Mark Doorley, our board president, at an event at the Romero Center in East Camden. I was doing a presentation about the Fair Trade Coffee program at our old parish and Mark encouraged me to come to a CfET meeting.

I've always been interested in and, hopefully, attentive to, environmental issues. I believe that environmental justice is one of those issues that, along with education, should trump many of the other important issues in our world, for the simple reason that, if we don't get that one right, it doesn't really matter how we do with the others. CfET provides a great framework and forum in which environmental justice can be discussed and explored. Too many people in our society, young and old, ignore the fact that our earth is a precious gift from God and that we have a responsibility to care for it. It's not something to be simply used up as we see fit, but something to be shared and protected.

**CfET: Bill, once you started attending the Center, what parts of the entire mission most pulled you into it? Where did you feel you could make a difference and why?**

**BILL:** I wanted to bring my experience in the Fair Trade program from our old parish to Sacred Heart and it seems to have taken root. We have a wholesaler in Connecticut, Dean's Beans, who sells to us at wholesale prices so we're able to mark it up a little bit to provide some revenue to the sponsoring cause. Their service has been excellent, and they even re-label the coffee as "Sacred Heart Parish Brew." Fair Trade is a natural fit with the justice issues that we focus on at CfET, a reminder to all of us that our purchase decisions have moral consequences. Jean and I sell Fair Trade chocolate as well, purchased directly from Catholic Relief Services. We and other members sell the items after our 10:30 mass and at any off-site events when we can. The coffee's also used for Sacred Heart's after-mass hospitality and other social affairs we have here.

**CfET: How did it feel to become so actively involved in the conversion of the Old Sacred Heart convent into what today is a completely renewed, updated building and functioning retreat center? Did anything surprise you during the process of this big undertaking?**

**BILL:** I really have enjoyed working on the Retreat Center. Jean and I actually worked on the building one Saturday as volunteers with Heart of Camden Housing before we

even knew that CfET existed. They told us to paint, so we painted, without really knowing what the building was going to become. Once I got involved with the Center, I got more involved with the renovations. Don Harle and Luis Santana (Sacred Heart Church's maintenance team) did most of the work.

**CfET: Bill, you're being modest—you became an indispensable team member, doing everything from demo, wall prep and painting and building all of the bunk beds. What about that?**

**BILL:** I did what I could with the time I had to devote to it, but so did lots of other volunteers. I did make all of the bunk beds in the center, which was a challenge, but also fun and rewarding.

**CfET: Beside that, did you learn anything about what your talents and skills were, or about where you wanted your energies to go toward furthering the Center's mission objectives? Are you seeing your ideas and/or your role in the process as different now that the Center is "off the ground"?**

**BILL:** I think that the work of the CfET is really going to blossom now that the Retreat Center is available to host visitors. The notion of environmental justice should exist everywhere, but the Waterfront South section of Camden is a perfect setting in which to immerse people in discussions and hands-on projects, because it's a living example of what happens when environmental justice is ignored.

**CfET: What do you envision happening here at Sacred Heart, and particularly at the Center for Environmental Transformation? Do you feel there is a larger role you could play in the ever-evolving dynamic of socially-conscious, earth-centered, Christian-based activism?**

**BILL:** I hope that I can continue to contribute to the exciting work that the brave folks who founded the Center for Environmental Transformation began long before I joined the group. Getting to know them has been very rewarding for me personally. I've learned a lot, and I've learned that I have much more to learn. I don't have much experience working with the young people who've come to the Center, but it's been so exciting to witness their enthusiasm and their energy. I'd like to see the use of the Retreat Center grow as more and more groups of students (young and old) get the opportunity to come to Camden and experience a transformation of their very own.

(Bill Harden was interviewed by board member Susan Hitchcock in August, 2011)

