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## Overwhelmingly white, the green movement is reaching for the rainbow

By Paula Bock

"What's a nice black guy like me doing in a movement like this?"

Van Jones strides the stage at the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center, a charismatic lawyer who grew up in rural Tennessee, graduated from Yale Law, and founded the Ella Baker Center for jobs and justice in Oakland.

Tall, 39, his pate shaved, he cuts a striking silhouette in a black turtleneck and blazer, but it's his daring message that electrifies the crowd. He's in Seattle to talk about "The Unbearable Whiteness of Green" and how the environmental movement needs to include people of color and the poor if there's any hope of slowing global warming.

All 250 seats quickly fill: Boomers wearing fleece, techies fiddling with gadgets, eco-chic in ethnic garb.

On an ordinary Wednesday night on an ever-warming planet, this is clearly Seattle's coolest spot, and for a predominantly white city, the crowd is remarkably racially diverse.

"The Prius people, the polar-bear crowd are great," Jones says. "We're not mad at them. We like them! At the same time, if the only people who can participate are the kind who can afford to put solar panels on their second home, the green movement is going to be too small to fix the problem. If we want to beat global warming, there's no way to do it without helping a lot of poor people. If you design a solution that does not do that, it's a solution that's too timid."

In Jones' eyes, the first wave of environmentalism, led by Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir, focused on preserving the nation's natural beauty in parks. The second wave, led by Rachel Carson of "Silent Spring," concentrated on federal regulation of toxics. The third wave, he says, is about investment. Initially, that meant individual consumer choice: hybrid cars, organic food, energy-efficient light bulbs. Now, it's evolved into major public spending and community-wide



HARLEY SOLTES / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Omandi Moikobu is a new technician at the Green Car Co. service center in Kirkland, where he is training to repair electric, hybrid and diesel-powered vehicles. Moikobu began working at Green Car through an internship program at South Seattle Community College.



HARLEY SOLTES / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
An elevated section of Interstate 5 sits only one lane away from a Chinatown International District apartment building. In a survey to assess environmental concerns in the community, air quality was listed as No. 2. Proximity to freeway exhaust could put the neighborhood's 4,200 residents at increased risk of asthma, bronchitis and lung cancer, among other ailments.



action.

Jones' grand vision? Think New Deal and civil-rights movement combined with a clean-green industrial revolution. The nation needs to train masses of "green-collar" workers to conduct energy audits, weatherize and retrofit buildings, install solar panels and maintain hybrid vehicles, wind farms and bio-fuel factories. The icing? Wiring buildings and installing solar panels can't be outsourced.

"Brother," Jones says, "put down that hand gun and pick up this caulk gun."

The new Energy Independence Act creates a program that spends \$125 million annually to train workers in the clean-energy sector. A Pathways Out of Poverty provision ensures training for the poor and marginalized.

Here in Washington, Gov. Christine Gregoire issued an executive order calling for 25,000 jobs in clean energy by 2020, and the Legislature made it law. In this session, the state Climate Action and Green Jobs bill, sponsored by Rep. Hans Dunshee and Sen. Craig Pridemore, calls for a labor-market analysis and competitive green-jobs grant program, followed by more green-jobs training.

Is grandma's heating bill too high? Jones asks. Well, hire a brother to insulate her building and install solar panels. The reduced energy demand will allow you to retire polluting power plants, meaning cleaner air, meaning little sister can get rid of her asthma inhaler.

SOUNDS GOOD, in theory.

In reality, once you step outside the middle-class mainstream, the meaning of "environment" shape-shifts as much as water morphing from ice to gas. The natural-fibers crowd may think of Earth as a blue-green orb with a capital E. Immigrants and the poor struggle with more down-to-earth issues: toxics at work and home, safety on the streets. Sometimes it seems like we're living on different planets.

For us, says director Ticiang Diangson of Seattle Public Utilities' environmental-justice/service-equity division, the environment "is really about our daily lives, here and now, whether my kid is sick because he's breathing something that's not agreeing with him, whether we have a roof over our heads that's not infested with mold, how we can get to our two or three jobs to hopefully make ends meet."

On side streets of the Chinatown International District, in Central Area nail salons and South Seattle meat-rendering

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Van Jones finds a receptive audience in Seattle, where he recently barnstormed with his message of how people of color and the poor can benefit from the new green economy. "Brother, put down that hand gun and pick up this caulk gun," he chants.



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The Danny Woo P-patch garden is frequented by drug users who leave used needles in an area where local residents grow traditional vegetables. Public safety is the top environmental concern in the area.



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Tien Tran, owner of Couture Nails & Spa, tries to talk customers into using non-toxic alternatives to acetone-based nail products. But often, it's a tough sell to women who aren't familiar with the alternatives and worry the quality won't be as good.

plants, I asked people about their relationship to the environment.

Soaking up sunshine before his afternoon walk, Ming Ren Chen, a 72-year-old immigrant from Guangzhou, answered with a Chinese proverb that loosely translates, "Don't be picky." As in, if your parents serve something you don't like, just eat it, don't waste, explains Luan Quach, a 19-year-old community-college student who moved to the Chinatown ID from Vietnam in 1997.

At 17, Quach joined the neighborhood's Wilderness Inner-City Leadership Development program (WILD), which brings young people and elders together to work on urban environmental projects.

A couple years ago, WILD surveyed residents, ranking their environmental concerns. No. 1? Public safety.

"We only have three open spaces in the whole community, all really small," says Joyce Pisanant, director of community building programs. "They're not utilized because they're not safe. Look at the intersection between social issues and health. Kids being obese because they can't run around outside. When you say 'the environment,' you think of creating these beautiful green spaces, but it's not going to help us if it just becomes a public-safety trap."

WILD is working with the University of Washington's landscape-architecture department to redesign a small children's park on the southern edge of the Chinatown ID. As is, the tidy park is ringed with greenery and has a dragon sculpture that kids from a local day-care center clamber on — if the park isn't already inhabited by street people or druggies. In that case, the children go back inside.

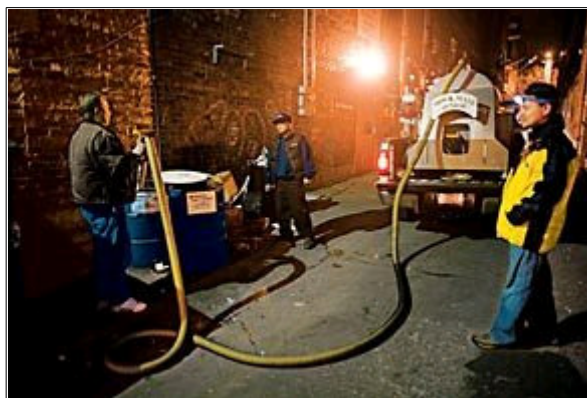
Popular summer "night markets," festivals and outdoor movies at Hing Hay Park drew more than 1,000 visitors in the summer — an effort to take back the park — but most days there's no programming. A huge, stainless-steel automatic toilet competes for attention with a red-tiled pavilion, and then the restroom doors open, a guy emerges, ranting mad or high or both. The rest of the park is empty, save for some golden ginkgo leaves blowing off the trees.

Which brings us to air quality, No. 2 on the community's list of environmental concerns. Surrounded by three highways — Interstate 5, Interstate 90 and Highway 99 — neighbors are also inundated with fumes from idling cars headed to the stadiums on game days.

Asthma rates in the Chinatown ID are 254 percent higher than anywhere else in the city, according to a county public-health study. Certain parts of the neighborhood have 10 times the amount of "black soot" (a proxy for airborne particulates) compared with meter readings on First Hill. Breathing Room, a preliminary study of air



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Signs must now be posted at Hing Hay Park to remind visitors that drugs and alcohol are not allowed in one of the Chinatown International District's main gathering places.



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Paul King, left, Clarence Pascua, center, and Yale Wong pump used fryer oil out of a drum in the alley behind a restaurant in the Chinatown International District late at night. "We're turning garbage into fuel," Wong says. "We don't want to fill landfills up with pollution and flies."



HARLEY SOLTES / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Wong got into the fuel business after his wife saw an ad offering to teach how to make biodiesel and asked him, "Do you want to change the world?"

quality in the area, warned that close proximity to freeway exhaust could put the neighborhood's 4,200 residents at increased risk of asthma, bronchitis, cardiac ischemia, lung cancer and childhood leukemia.

On King Street, the windows of one apartment building are less than a lane away from I-5. WILD volunteers tell residents not to open their windows during rush hour — only when traffic calms at night, and not for long.

CLEAN AIR is also a dream for Tien Tran, 27-year-old owner of Couture Nails & Spa in the Central Area.

Tran and her workers use ceiling ventilation and quickly recap bottles to reduce fumes. Still, the salon reeks.

The problem? Harsh chemicals in many polishes and acrylics (hard plastics that adhere to and extend the natural fingernail). The toxic formulas also expose nail-salon workers to dibutyl phthalate, toluene and formaldehyde, substances linked to respiratory problems, miscarriage and developmental disorders in infants exposed in utero.

For Tran and other nail-salon workers, many of them Vietnamese-American women, challenges come from both sides. They must pressure manufacturers to reformulate products with fewer or no toxins — and persuade customers to give up acrylic nails and toxic polishes.

Most clients are "oblivious that certain chemicals used on them are unhealthy," Tran says. She suggests less toxic polishes, or basic manicures and pedicures that shine the nail with buffing and natural oil.

Many listen; few change. The eco-friendly polishes sometimes don't adhere as well or last as long. And it's a pain to grow out fingernails and "go natural."

Tran: "The Buddhists believe this world is just a huge recycling bin. Everything gets reused and recycled and should be well-kept. If we're going to misuse products, it's going to come back to us and deprive us of a healthier way of living."

She sits down with Margaret Rodney, who wears glossy acrylic nails in sports-car red. Tran explains the health issues, asks her to "go natural."

Rodney has been a loyal customer for a decade, mostly because she admires the tiny abstract paintings the nail artist creates on each fingernail.

"If you were to suggest I go with a new product, I would trust you," Rodney says. But she says her natural nails are weak; they need acrylics for strength. Weeks later, she still hasn't made the switch.

"Somehow, later down the line, I'm going to transition my salon into natural products whether they like it or not," Tran vows, though she worries about losing customers. "We're not in business just to take their money. We're going to be about longevity."

FOR YALE WONG, an entrepreneur who grew up on Beacon Hill, starting a biodiesel company is a business opportunity, an ethical choice and the chance to hurdle another color barrier.

"You'll never get anywhere if you think you have to take those restaurant jobs," Wong advises others. "Break out of the stereotype."

Wong made his fortune as CEO and founder of Compass Communications, becoming the state's first Asian-American owner of an Internet service provider. After selling Compass in 2004, he retired at 37, bought sports cars, donated to charities, invested here and there, then realized his brain was turning to mush.

"My wife says, 'Do you want to make a change in the world? Can you reduce global warming? Can you reduce dependency on foreign oil? Help the local economy?'" She handed him an ad from the newspaper: *Learn how to*

*make biodiesel for 30 cents a gallon.* A guy named BioLyle was teaching.

"So I'm sitting there in a room with tree huggers. I'm kind of like: I'm a businessman! What is this about? Is this a joke?" BioLyle turned waste vegetable oil into biodiesel, poured it in his car and drove around the block.

"I said to myself, forget about home brewing! Who is doing this commercially? I took some money out of my piggy bank."

Wong founded General Biodiesel in 2006, after zigzagging across the country touring biodiesel plants with his wife. For this savvy entrepreneur, the green world is just another playing field. But for first-generation immigrants like his father, who worked in the restaurant business for 22 years, Wong says, living is all about making ends meet. These days, after dark, when the streets of the Chinatown ID finally clear of traffic, General Biodiesel manager Clarence Pascua prowls the alleys in a gleaming white pickup pumping used cooking grease into a fat tank.

Soon, the oil will be processed in a factory Wong is purchasing. From outside, your nose would never guess the facility is a meat-rendering plant. But inside — what a stench! The vast floor is covered in garbage cans filled with rotting carcasses left over from markets, butchers, restaurants. The scraps are ground up, conveyed into a cooker, then into a gyrator that glows like Hades and vibrates out the solids. The oil drips into separate tanks. After General Biodiesel installs specialized equipment, it will be processed into biodiesel.

"We don't want to fill landfills up with pollution and flies," Wong says. The plant makes 2 million gallons of oil a year. By the end of the year, Wong expects to quintuple production and hire a dozen more workers. Green-collar jobs.

THAT WEDNESDAY night, Jones' bold ideas about eco-equity resonated with the Seattle crowd, but the truth is, we are not Northern California, where the Berkeley City Council recently agreed to foot the bill for installing solar panels and solar water heaters (residents pay back the cost over 20 years), and Oakland recently authorized \$250,000 for a Green Jobs Corps.

Around here, when it comes to green-collar training, educators often use the phrase "on the cusp." Translate: lots of ideas, most still in concept.

"You want to train them for specific areas where you know there will be jobs," says Pinky Dale, dean of apprenticeship at South Seattle Community College. But it's hard to project. "So you take a shotgun approach." The college has held classes on porous cement and energy-auditing, and set up plug-in and hybrid-car internships with the King County fleet and Kirkland's Green Car Co.

"Green cars and biodiesel are the thing of the future," says Omandi Moikobu, an SSCC student whose internship with the Green Car Co. led to a staff job. Moikobu is no eco-hipster, but he has found opportunity in clean-burning, low-emission technology. "It's something that will hopefully grow."

Shoreline Community College, where nearly a quarter of students are on financial aid, offers courses on biodiesel and hybrid cars as well as a certificate program in solar-panel installation.

At Centralia College, a Center for Excellence in Energy, the charge is to train students in thermal and hydro power in a state where 65 percent of power comes from water, says director Barbara Hins-Turner. "Here's the problem in this industry: Seattle Steam and Puget Sound Energy have these wonderful old plants that are 80-100 years old, and we are training to that — and their renewable energy upgrades — because that's the technology we have right now. . . . We teach a little bit of wind and biomass, but it's more theory, not hands-on."

As for solar panels? In Northern California, so many homeowners want solar, there's a worker shortage to install them. Here, most homeowners are holding off on plunking down 10 to 20 grand. That's because the state subsidy

of 15 cents per kilowatt hour more than triples to 54 cents if the panels are manufactured in Washington. Yet the first Washington-made solar panels are just now coming out of production.

At Puget Sound Electrical Apprenticeship Training Center in Renton, an awning of 60 solar panels adorns the building's south face. The panels look straightforward, but they're really not. Instructor Ernie Tinker thumps on a code manual thicker than a Seattle phone book and points to a hefty study guide for installers. Entry-level workers could haul materials, run wire, bolt things down, he says, but the system needs to be set up by an electrician. For safety, solar panels need to meet code, and for performance, it all needs to mesh with a home's existing system.

The state doesn't regulate solar-panel installation, but it does require a licensed electrician for work inside the house. That means two years' schooling and 4,000 on-the-job hours for residential; double that for commercial work.

Van Jones' dream of training a green-collar workforce to install solar panels requires a huge investment in real dollars and time.

Still, the electrical apprentices have no doubt a solar boom looms, somewhere.

After all, a square meter of sunlight has 1,000 watts of power — and every color of the rainbow.

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