

“Change Our Ways, Save Our Earth”

By Maria Merolle

In the increasingly prevalent debate about environmental consciousness, there are two main parties: those who believe that natural catastrophe is inevitable unless we change our ways and those who brush aside the issue in favor of more immediate concerns. The latter group largely consists of those who are unaware of the seriousness of our environmental problems, those who have heard the hackneyed argument for “going green” so many times that the phrase has lost its sense of necessity. Despite the consistent caveats of environmentalists, few have really invested themselves in changing our harmful ways and beginning the reversal of the environmental damage that is more serious than many people know.

Last year, my parents looked further into the issue of our environmental footprint and since then, our perspective has really changed. Spreading this motivation for change in the way we treat the natural world has become very important to me, but it is difficult to get people to take a fresh look at the argument they have been fed for so long. Although improvements have been made in the actions of companies and individuals, our environmental future is still in peril unless this generation comes together in a way that they have never done before and looks at the issue with new awareness. It can start in Alachua County, it can start at Eastside High School; there has never been a better time for change than right now.

People who wish to downplay the urgency of our environmental crisis might cite the economy as a more important issue. Despite the current period of recession, America is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, and our economy is only going to expand in the future. What could be a downside to greater industry, more production, higher profits? The obstacle to this seemingly ideal situation is the environment. As E.O. Wilson points out in his book *The Future of Life*, our natural world is finite. Humans, with our preoccupation with instant gratification, are often blinded with desire for the next big thing and become fixated on expansion, not pausing to wonder how we will enjoy new products if smog has overtaken our cities and our nonrenewable resources are drained. The environment has a limit on how much human development it can

sustain, and in order to make the most efficient use of that capacity, we must alter our methods of living to become more environmentally friendly.

The most pressing environmental issue in Alachua County is likely the contamination from the Cabot-Koppers site that is affecting the water in our aquifer. The Cabot-Koppers plant in Gainesville treated wooden telephone poles with chromated copper arsenate, which has been proven to be carcinogenic. This toxic chemical seeped into our water source via a creek system into which the Koppers plant poured its waste water. According to koppersgainesville.com, arsenic was found in the aquifer beneath the Koppers site at levels three times the Federal standard. The site ceased operation in 2010, but another company, Beezer East, began construction on the site last year and is potentially contaminating our neighborhoods with toxic dust containing dioxin. This is a local example of environmental damage that is being repeated by large companies nationwide. The risk could be eliminated with the implementation of state-enforced regulations on toxic emissions for companies, especially ones that operate near neighborhoods. As long as the potential for contamination is there, that should be all the reason we need to change the materials used in their operations.

This is not to say that pollution is running rampant in Alachua County; on the contrary, our air quality is relatively good and there are many protective policies in place to keep our North Florida environment healthy. In my many experiences at Florida's beautiful beaches, I have never noticed offensive pollution, partially thanks to the Florida Environmental Protection Department's P2 (Pollution Prevention) Mission, which monitors air and water pollution in Florida and cleans up hazardous materials such as petroleum and household chemicals. There are about 230 curbside recycling programs in Florida; my family and many others make good use of Big Blue and Big Orange recycling. One of the most important goals is land conservation and

Alachua County Forever is working to “manage environmentally significant lands” to protect resources and wildlife habitat, according to their mission statement. These endeavors are evidence of what can be achieved with a unified effort; their work has clearly paid off, as one can see in our well-maintained city.

However, the work of the individual is equally important. Each of these successful programs was started by someone with an idea who had the drive to put it into action. The reason that many people do not keep faith in their ideas is that they do not believe efforts on such a small scale will create noticeable change. However, if numerous individuals put their thoughts into action, the movement will amass support as other individuals do the same and join them. The growth of world-changing movements depends on the determination of individuals to take part. My family grows our produce in an eco-friendly box garden in our backyard. We buy organic whenever possible and my dad bikes to places whenever he can. We used to be the only garden on the block until one of our neighbors saw our gorgeous tomato plants and was inspired to plant her own. Now there are two gardens, and so begins the change. As president of the sophomore class at Eastside, I hope to be an example for my peers on Earth Day, when our student government is holding an event to beautify the green spaces on campus.

Do not let nature crumble under the weight of our actions. We have the foresight to recognize the environmental crisis; now, let us muster the courage to come together and stop it.