

OIL IS EVERYWHERE

'I try to use things as long as I possibly can'

Q & A with actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr.

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Actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr. was barely out of his teens in 1970 when he took part in the nation's first Earth Day celebration and got his first electric car. He's had five more since then, plus a hybrid here and there and a natural gas vehicle.

Begley, 58, is a well-known veteran in the acting world, having appeared in television shows and movies as diverse as "Happy Days," "St. Elsewhere" and "Batman Forever."

But in 1990, Begley changed course. It was the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, he said, and "I wanted to up the ante. I wanted to do more."

Since then, he's become almost as famous for his environmental commitment and causes. Many remember him riding his bicycle to the Oscars. For a while, Begley's devotion triggered a cross between amusement and derision among the public and his peers. But, it turns out, he was just ahead of the pack.

Friends now seek his advice on how to make their homes and lives more green. He sometimes gives media and guest tours of his Studio City home, which is electrically self-sufficient, sporting solar-electric and wind power that gets stored in batteries for use at night and on overcast days. There's a solar water heater, a small solar oven, a fruit and vegetable garden and a patch of lawn made mostly from recycled tires.

For two seasons, the HGTV cable network ran "Living With Ed," a reality series based on Begley's green principles, and he's just published a companion book, "Living Like Ed," that includes sometimes-sarcastic commentary from his wife, actress Rachelle Carson.

In an interview -- preceded by a tour of his house -- Begley discussed how and why others should follow his lead.

What role does petroleum play in modern life in general and in your life?

It's everywhere. You can't get away from it. I need it for my eyeglasses. We need it for medical supplies. I'm not a Luddite. I have a cellphone, and a computer and a fax machine and the things that I feel I need to live a modern life and to spread the word about things that I think are important. I think it's a question of eliminating it as best you can, in every way that you can.

Plastic is pervasive, with grocery bags and bottles of all kinds. How do you cut back?

I stopped buying bottled water. I never really liked it much, but Rachelle liked it, so I bought it. She liked it for hikes and what have you. I won her over to the idea of just a refillable thing. We have a water filter on the sink that works very well. In the 1970s, I stopped taking paper or plastic bags at the market. You hand them canvas bags and they're happy to use them.

What about all the other plastic bottles?

That's more challenging. Even the wonderful Seventh Generation products, laundry soaps and what have you that are nontoxic, they're still going to come in HDPE, high-density polyethylene bottles. The best you can do with that is recycle that HDPE so it can have another life. It can be made into somebody's fence or hopefully into another bottle.

How difficult is it to make those changes when you're not the only one in your house -- when part of your sales job has to be aimed at your own family?

I think it's a real issue. I think we're doing pretty well with it. I try to be very understanding. My wife is -- and she will tell you this -- she's something of a consumer; she gets pleasure out of shopping. I get no pleasure out of shopping. I try to use things as long as I possibly can.

It's kind of intimidating to see all that you've done -- and it's quite expensive, right?

I started doing this 38 years ago. It's been a long journey to do all this stuff. Not everybody's going to be able to afford solar electric. Not everybody's going to be able to afford a hybrid or an electric car like I have. In 1970, when I started this journey, I couldn't afford solar electric, that took me 20 years to be able to afford that. But I did a lot of stuff on a very modest budget in 1970, and I learned, much to my surprise, that I was saving money doing it.

What do you tell people when they ask you how to get started?