

FROM GREEN SCHOOLS TO A GREEN ART STUDIO — NEW CAREER FOR VETERAN ENERGY EDUCATOR

After a long career educating consumers and young people about clean energy, Merrilee Harrigan left the energy field this year to start a new career as a glass artist.

Merrilee began her energy career in 1977 by building her own passive solar house in Western Massachusetts. (She moved away after a few years, but says that she retains “visitation rights” and it still operates well.) After a brief time working on the technical side of energy, she became interested in the “people” side — how do you explain solar energy and get consumers to understand how it is relevant and useful in their lives? She pursued this at the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) from 1980 until 1986, starting TVA’s Solar Information Service — taking on the daunting task of training and supporting TVA staff, largely, traditional home economists and agricultural engineers, to educate the public about solar energy.

After a brief stint at the Edison Electric Institute, Merrilee joined the Alliance to Save Energy (Alliance) in 1996, focusing on empowering low-income consumers to take greater control of their energy consumption and home comfort. Her research on the effectiveness of various methods of education — videos vs. a single home visit vs. multiple home visits, was among the earliest research that actually measured energy consumption changes resulting from different education strategies. Her ACEEE paper Moving Consumers to Choose Energy Efficiency was significant in helping the energy efficiency community recognize the importance of engaging people as well as developing more efficient technologies.

Educating adults is challenging, as we know, and after five years working with utilities to devise effective strategies to work effectively with their low-income consumers, Merrilee switched her focus to what she found to be a more receptive audience — students in K-12 schools and universities. This is where Merrilee found her true passion: developing innovative and cutting edge learning experiences for students that support math, science and language arts skills while engaging students in an effort to save energy in their schools. The PowerSave Schools and Campus programs (originally the Green Schools and Green Campus programs) have operated in over 10 states and in India, Ghana and Serbia and Ukraine. The program has saved millions of dollars for schools and campuses, and more importantly has contributed to raising a generation of young people who are, as adults, are taking energy efficiency awareness into their adult lives as a matter of course.

While the work has been incredibly rewarding, after 26 years at the Alliance, Merrilee decided to move in an entirely different direction. Fused glass art has been a passion, but one she could only practice on a very part-time basis. She retired from the Alliance in January, and has founded a new company, Joy of Glass. She is jumping in to the artist life with both feet. You can see her art at JoyOfGlass.com

Merrilee hasn’t lost her commitment to clean energy and the environment, however — the new studio in her home has triple glazed windows, gobs of foam insulation, and a 5 KW solar system!