A second life spreading climate-change warning

by Mike Lee

SAN DIEGO - At first glance, Gary Dunham seems an odd choice to lead an environmental revolution.

By his own admission, the retired graphic designer from Sugar Land, Texas, is "getting a little on" at age 71. For most of his life, the longtime Republican voter had given little thought to conservation issues such as climate change.

CLIMATE - Gary Dunham, a 71-year-old longtime Republican and retired graphic designer from Sugar Land, Texas, brought his message about global warning to San Ysidro High School yesterday. Photo by Dan Trevan. CLIMATE - Valerie J. Pennington, a professor of biology at Southwestern College in Chula Vista, California, gave a presentation yesterday at San Ysidro High School. Photo by Dan Trevan. But the chubby guy with white hair is now a field general for The Climate Project, an international campaign begun by former Vice President Al Gore to popularize the fight against global warming and promote grass-roots measures.

Dunham recently became operations director for the initiative, which has more than 1,000 participants worldwide, including roughly a dozen in San Diego County. These volunteer ambassadors include students, professors, musicians, scientists, retirees - even a beauty queen. They make presentations at home shows, churches, schools and other venues.

Gore and Dunham were in San Diego County Monday - Gore for a speaking gig at University of California San Diego and Dunham to kick off more than a week of presentations to students in the Sweetwater Union High School District.

"This has been a whirlwind," Dunham said at San Ysidro High School. "I work harder now than I ever have."

While Gore's star status draws adoring crowds to his events, Dunham's low-profile passion for saving the Earth from overheating could be just as influential.

Dunham organizes the project's volunteers, urging them to educate their communities about global warming long after Gore leaves town and in places he never visits.

"We spread those thousand people out and if you call me from Wyoming, I've got somebody ... to send over there. We've got them everywhere," Dunham said.

New members make pilgrimages to Gore's headquarters in Nashville, Tenn., where the veteran politician teaches them to spread the word regarding global warming. Participants pay for most of their expenses and sign a contract that states they won't charge for their presentations.

The climate-change missionaries base their presentations on "An Inconvenient Truth," Gore's Oscar-winning documentary.

Dunham makes no apologies for his close connection to a former presidential candidate whom he didn't support. Other Climate Project speakers downplay Gore in their attempts to sell the global-warming message across the political spectrum.

Presenters typically emphasize layman's language, not science lingo, and they continually update their presentations with the latest data. Audiences range from a few family members to a few thousand students.

"I really do think (it's) about making a difference. You talk about having a positive impact on society, even if it is just 10 people at a time," said Hector Rivera, a Climate Project ambassador and president of the

Associated Student Organization at Southwestern College in Chula Vista.

Not everyone believes in the cause.

"It's laughable that Gore is rounding up an army of lackeys to propagate global-warming hysteria when he is such a tremendous polluter and energy consumer," said Drew Johnson, president of the Tennessee Center for Policy Research.

The libertarian think tank blasted Gore in February, contending that his mansion drains more energy in a month than the average U.S. household uses in a year. Power production is a major source of greenhouse gases, which create an atmospheric blanket and trap the Earth's heat.

A BIG CONVERSION

Dunham's unlikely story began last July in a hotel room in Washington, D.C. He was watching television while waiting for the conclusion of a conference his wife was attending.

When "The Oprah Winfrey Show" came on, he wanted to change the channel but couldn't find the remote control. Winfrey's guest was actor and avid environmentalist Leonardo DiCaprio, who talked about global warming. Dunham professed dislike for both entertainers, but a scientist on the show kept his attention.

"I realized that I stood there for about 20 minutes just totally mesmerized," he said.

Gore's movie was among the topics discussed. With time on his hands, Dunham went to the nearest theater and watched the documentary.

"It just blew me away," he said. "I had no concept of how close this was to being on us."

Next, Dunham bought the book version of "An Inconvenient Truth." Then, he persuaded his wife to let him share Gore's warning with her civic group, Daughters of the American Revolution.

For his talks, Dunham cribbed large sections of Gore's book and used his graphic-design talents to dress them up. He gave about three dozen presentations over several months before wondering if he was saying the right things.

After several fruitless attempts to contact global-warming experts, Dunham dialed directory assistance in Nashville and asked for Al Gore. To his surprise, he soon was talking with Gore's chief of staff.

Within a few days, Dunham was invited to Nashville for Gore's first training session with 50 people who wanted to do what Dunham already was doing - telling audiences about global warming and ways to deal with it.

The meeting took place in September. Gore brought the participants to his family farm and led them down to the river on hay wagons. Dunham said he got more skeptical as they rode along.

"This looks like an old-fashioned revival," he recalled. "I thought, 'I really hope he doesn't stand up and start

preaching to us.' But that man started talking and he knocked my lights out again. I thought he was going to levitate at the end."

GLOBAL EXPANSION

The initial training session soon expanded to include volunteers in England and Australia. Today, Dunham is fielding training requests from about a dozen countries - including Japan and China - as he tries to bring a sales-force type of structure to his loose-knit group of climate activists.

His other goals include creating a national public-service advertising campaign about global warming and bringing together the splintered environmental movement to address the issue.

Meanwhile, the Climate Project's local ambassadors eagerly look for ways to disseminate their message. A handful of them are working this week in the south San Diego County, where San Ysidro High School biology teacher Heather Gastil persuaded administrators at 16 schools to put global warming on their year-end agendas.

Hector Espinoza, the principal of San Ysidro High, said he didn't need much prodding to allow a school assembly. "It's just one of those nontraditional things that we need to teach kids ... because it affects their everyday life," he said.

At Point Loma Nazarene University, biology professor Mike Mooring targets a different audience for his Climate Project presentations. Mooring joined the group, he said, because many evangelical Christians need to wake up to what science shows about global warming instead of rejecting it out of their distaste for Gore or Democrats.

"It is really easy for the detractors to say this movement is led by a bunch of limousine liberals. It's important that people from those evangelical communities go speak to folks and say this is not a political issue," he said. "This is a spiritual issue."

In Mission Viejo, retired Navy officer and climate ambassador Scott Palmer focuses on fixer-uppers.

He's making good on his plan to attend every home show in the greater Los Angeles area this year to push high-efficiency light bulbs, solar panels, tankless hot water heaters and other practical ideas for reducing energy use.

"Most of what I talk with people about is how you can save money - how you can be less wasteful and put more money in your pocket," Palmer said. "This is a global, universal problem and we're trying to depoliticize it."

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