

BLAZING

THE SOLAR FRONTIER

by Keith Waller

Someone must blaze a trail for the rest of us to follow. Leadership may not always come from those in authority either, but from individuals who take the initiative to do the right thing, and to persevere against all odds. Mary Howard of Murrells Inlet is one of those pioneers.

Feisty and determined, Mary decided some time ago that she would personally be a part of the environmental solution to global warming, pollution and energy shortages. She did the research, made the calls and refused to give up when met with resistance. She educated herself on the options, and at the recommendation of Horry Electric Cooperative, called Carolina Solar in Surfside Beach to start the conversion of her home to solar power.

Dan Evans, of Carolina Solar, was with Mary when I arrived, checking the operation of new equipment. The new solar hot water system had just been installed and was working at mid-temperature until a new valve could be delivered, a valve that allowed the system to run at maximum capacity without danger of scalding. Water in this system is heated entirely by the warmth of sunshine. And with the premium high efficiency vacuum tube solar collector, has the capacity to generate tremendous heat from a relatively small panel, even on mostly cloudy days.

"It's at 147 degrees right now, but it can go up to 200 degrees." Dan's associate, Sean had backed the temperature off; the valve didn't come in with the tank and he'll be back to install it. "Without solar, it would be burning 9000 watts of electricity to make hot water, like any typical hot water heater."

The hot water tank in the garage looks like any other, but the insulated pipes are meticulously wrapped with much more care than in most homes.

An unassuming grey metal cabinet sits nearby, and Dan opens it proudly to display his high tech solar gear. "These are 6 volt premium Concorde golf cart batteries, 305 amp hours each, with an Outback inverter. There are other recommended manufacturers too, but Outback is one of the best."

Mary Howard's solar-electric system consists of 20 photovoltaic panels on the roof, wired to the cabinet in the garage where power is directed to the inverter and battery bank, and eventually to the main electrical panel for the house. When the Howards run electric appliances and air conditioning, the solar panels provide power first, and as the sun sets, more of the power gradually comes from the electric utility through the meter that registers watts and calculates dollars.

"When the Howards are on vacation and there isn't power being used, the system shuts down, and doesn't return power to the grid for neighbors to use. Horry Electric Cooperative doesn't allow net metering, so you can't run the meter backwards with solar in this part of Murrells Inlet," says Evans. In spite of Federal Mandates, in place since 2005, Horry Electric Cooperative has resisted

moving forward with environmental advances for solar and wind power, and has no 'net-metering' program to allow residents to take full advantage of solar energy.

"I wanted to do something for me *and* for the environment. I wanted to *do* something, that was my main kick," explains Mary. "I was committed to doing solar, even when the neighbors were against it. They said 'Mary, you won't recover your investment until long after you're gone,' but they didn't understand that it isn't just about the money." Considering the impending increases in the cost of generating electricity, due to steadily increasing prices in coal, carbon offsets, and pollution controls,

Mary Howard may be seeing a much greater value for her investment than her doubting neighbors realize. "I read about that new power plant they want to build. I just don't understand why they

can't try to do some of it with solar and wind power," she says.

"The neighbors came over to watch when it was being installed. One couple didn't want us to do it—they didn't want to see the solar panels on our roof. The Home Owners Association (HOA) tried to stop us too. I told them to suck eggs," she says with narrowed eyes. "My husband was so impressed with my resolve and my determination that he backed me 100%. He told me, 'we'll do what's best for us, and if necessary, we'll see them in court.' I even talked to a supervisor at the US Department of Energy for support and advice."

I mentioned to Mary the similarity between now and when satellite TV came on the market, and how HOAs threatened lawsuits for anyone contemplating a dish antenna. "Oh we had that battle, too," she said. Mary Howard clearly does not back down.

"You know, in the beginning my husband wasn't all for this solar energy





Pioneer Mary Howard

stuff. It is a lot of money, and we're retired, you know. But the other day he said, 'Why not run a duct to the garage and air-condition it too? It's free electricity and we're making more than we need.' Can you believe that?"

"For me, a lot of this comes from growing up in Arlington, watching it get all built up. When you get older, you wonder what you can do to lessen this, to make it right. My Dad was always big on saving energy and water. In my house, you never left a room without turning the light out, and electricity is much more expensive up there. Here in South Carolina, we can't believe how low the price of electric is," she explains. Of course, that may be one of the reasons Mary's neighbors fail to understand her desire to reduce already inexpensive coal-powered electricity usage.

"I've only got a partial bill this month since the system was installed, maybe two weeks, but it's already \$70 lower - normally my electric bill is around \$190 a month this time of year. The other day Carolina Solar came out to test the system, and they shut down the main power from the electric company. We were on batteries and solar, and there wasn't even a blink inside the house. You would never know the power went off."

"Well, if there's a big storm and the power goes off," Dan pipes in, "you'll have to invite the neighbors over for air conditioning and movies on TV." A quick glare from Mary caused him to revise that statement. "Well, maybe you could invite them over and sell tickets."

For more information on solar energy call Dan Evans at Carolina Solar, (843) 238-5805, or see CarolinaCool.com. See ad page 11.

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