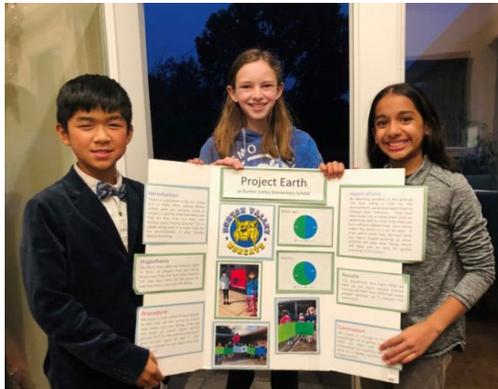


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Small things add up: Project Earth recognized for environmental contributions

By Sharon K. Sobotta



David Siu, Lauren Brekke and Raini Chugh present their vision and findings from Project Earth. The trio, who are now sixth-graders at Stanley Middle School, launched their campaign to reduce idling cars during school pickups and drop-offs when they were students at Burton Valley Elementary School, and have continued their efforts to tackle climate change at the local level. Photo provided

When many of us were stuck inside due to the poor air quality from the fires in 2018, Raini Chugh, Lauren Brekke and David Siu took note of something else that was impacting the environment right in front of their school everyday: idling cars.

That's what inspired the trio of friends who are now sixth-graders at Stanley Middle School to launch Project Earth and paved the way for them to earn one of the two environmental excellence awards for 2021.

Chugh recalls people paying more attention to the air quality and the monitors at school. "We realized it wasn't just the air quality from the fires. It was also from the cars dropping off (or picking up) their kids at school," Chugh says. "A lot of cars were idling and it was completely unnecessary so we decided to take action."

While at Burton Valley, Chugh, Brekke and Siu began their efforts to curb idling with a poster contest-inviting their peers and schoolmates to creatively contribute to the campaign to teach parents to turn off their engines. Siu says he's seen evidence that their efforts have been making a difference.

"We saw a 10% decrease in the number of idling cars," says Siu, who originally became concerned when he noticed a high number of cars with their engines running as he took the bus to school. He's pleased to see some people changing their habits.

Although the three students have moved on from Burton Valley Elementary School and now attend Stanley, their work is not done. In addition to continuing to push parents toward turning off their cars while waiting outside of schools in Lafayette, they are involved in the efforts to create safe bike lanes in Burton Valley, they're helping spread awareness about the option of having solar and wind powered homes and they've got plans for the next Earth Day.

"We want to have an arbor day celebration around Earth Day and have people plant trees, which will also help with clean air," says Brekke, who believes that spreading the word is a form of taking action and she hopes everyone realizes that they can make a difference.

"Just taking a long shower or idling your car might not seem like a big deal but so many people do (those things that) it results in a big problem," Brekke says.

If you're skeptical about whether or not your particular idling car matters, Chugh says it does.

"If everyone idles their car, it's all going to add up and make a difference that we don't want, so we're trying to pick projects that everyone does (and can change)," Chugh says. "I think the most important thing I've learned is that we have to keep going even when we face obstacles." Chugh says the group has aspirations of pushing beyond no idling practices at schools and toward the passage of a no idling ordinance in the city of Lafayette. "Before this I had never done public speaking. I had no idea about the city council or how any of that works," Chugh says confidently while describing how much she's learned.

Sejal Choksi-Chugh is Raini's mom and serves as Project Earth's advisor and as the liaison to Sustainable Lafayette. Choksi-Chugh says she's really proud of the kids not only for earning the recognition of an environmental excellence award, which was awarded at the Dec. 13 Lafayette City Council meeting, but for their tenacity, persistence and dedication.

"Climate change is such a huge problem and yet these kids feel enthusiastic and inspired and they want to tackle the problem at a local level," Choksi-Chugh says. "It's exciting to work with this group of kids. They're taking their ideas and learning life skills while they work on the problem of climate change. They've learned how to run meetings, make presentations, plan projects and make goals achievable. I think they'll be able to take this experience with them into any future career that they want to have. For their voices to

be heard and recognized by the city council has been really rewarding."

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