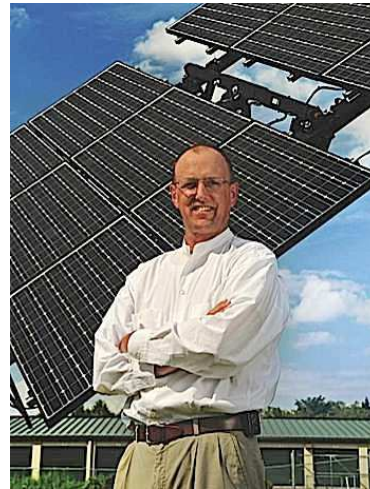


Staying Power

A commitment to conservation is starting to pay off for this entrepreneur

by Virginia Lindauer Simmon

Scott Gardner created Building Energy in 2007 to expand the commitment of his company Northeast Construction to reducing carbon footprint. In addition to conducting energy audits, Building Energy tests and installs various types of insulation materials; solar, wind, and wood energy systems; high-tech window products; and a host of related things such as heat recovery ventilation.



On the wall in the reception area at Building Energy in Williston is a quote from Albert Einstein that reads: “The amount of sunlight reaching the earth’s surface is 6,000 times the amount of energy used by all human beings worldwide. The total amount of fossil fuel used by humans since the start of civilization is equivalent to less than 30 days of sunshine.”

It’s exactly the kind of thing that anyone who has spent time with Scott Gardner, the founder and president of Building Energy, would expect to find.

“He is a man on a mission,” says graphic designer Deborah Kehoe, the founder of Kehoe + Kehoe Design Associates in Swanton. Kehoe has known Gardner for nearly 20 years and done work for Building Energy since Gardner launched it in 2007 as a way to augment the work he had been doing with his other company, Northeast Construction. She even helped him name his new venture.

Building Energy tests, designs, and installs systems, from conservation and weatherization to solar voltaics and power systems. Gardner does energy audits and handles the thermal side of the business; his partner, Nicholas Ponzio, is a solar engineer; and Basil Stetson, vice president, is the pellet boiler and wood gasification expert.

Gardner did not grow up in Vermont, but his roots run deep in the Green Mountains. His mother, Jane Gardner, represented Arlington in the Vermont Legislature in the 1980s. Politics, he claims, is one of his hobbies.

His father, a lawyer who worked in New Jersey, where Gardner grew up, once ran for Congress and once worked for Jack Kennedy, he says. “After Kennedy was assassinated, he worked for a couple of U.S. senators. My grandfather was a senator of some kind, too — though not a U.S. senator.”

After graduating from high school in northern New Jersey, Gardner briefly attended American University in Washington, D.C., but before a semester

had passed, he decided it was not where he wanted to be. He and Carol Bentley, whom he had met there, traveled to Colorado, where Gardner worked in construction for a couple of years. “I decided I really enjoyed construction,” he says. But his connection with Vermont was strong.

Although not fully staffed because of the economy, the company has 28 employees, many of them longtimers.

From left are Robert Paquette, insulation installer; Doug Loso, foam insulation installer; Jason Gonyeau, solar installer; Brian Bergeron, solar and insulation manager; Andrew Hathaway, energy auditor; and Ben McFeeters, warehouse manager.



Gardner was 22 when they returned from Colorado and he found a job doing construction in southern Vermont.

He and Carol had married in Colorado, and their first child, Cassy, was born in 1974, followed a year and a half later by their son, Sam. Sometime in the late 1970s, realizing he needed an education, Gardner found a job in Amherst, Mass., and took up residency there with Carol and the kids to qualify for state tuition at the University of Massachusetts. “I went to school four years, working construction all the way through, then came back to Vermont,” he says, “and went back into construction up here.”

He worked for a series of companies until 1980, when the recession hit. He had been working for a Montpelier company and was laid off. “I couldn’t find work, so I started my own business — Northeast Construction — in 1981 with one of the other employees from that company.

It wasn’t long before his partner was hired away, and Gardner became the sole owner.

Working from his home in South Burlington, he did mostly small commercial projects and a few residential jobs when he could pick them up. “It was a tough time there in the early ’80s,” he says, “but I think within five years or so, we rented a small office in South Burlington, and by the end of the decade, we had eight to 10 employees.”

Realizing he needed help with the administrative part of owning a business — “understanding balance sheets, human resources, a lot of things,” he says — Gardner enrolled in an evening MBA program at the University of Vermont.

“I did half of the program, but when it started moving into international principles, I felt I didn’t need that, so I didn’t finish.”

By the early ’90s, another recession had hit, and Gardner shifted gears into residential remodeling to keep things going. That was the start of his interest in “insulating structures really well,” he says.

“The first solar job I did was back when Jimmy Carter was president — for my brother-in-law — but when Reagan came in, he took the solar panels off the White House and cancelled all those incentives, so that died. In the '90s, I did a lot of residential work and became very interested in energy conservation, not so much from the perspective of global warming or peak oil, but more from a perspective of wanting to make sure structures were well insulated and comfortable.”

The company built custom homes and commercial structures in the '90s. “By 2004, we had built some extraordinarily energy-efficient structures, commercial and residential,” he says.

By 2007, Gardner was eager to create an avenue where the company could expand its commitment to reducing the carbon footprint. “The construction company,” he says, “while great — and it still does that — it seemed like we needed to really show our commitment.”

This meant, among other things, selling products. “Aside from insulation,” he says, “there’s solar, wind, alternative forms of heating — we do high-tech window products, daylighting products like prismatic skylights, and a whole host of things like heat recovery ventilation, whatever is needed by the structure to reduce energy consumption by 70 percent. That’s why we started Building Energy.”

Rounding out Gardner’s expertise in thermal energy are Nik Ponzio (left), a partner in the company and a certified solar PV installer, and Basil Stetson, vice president, an expert in pellet boilers and wood gasification.



Enter Nik Ponzio, whom Gardner had met through Efficiency Vermont, where Ponzio’s wife works. A 2001 graduate of the UVM College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences with a degree in electrical engineering, Ponzio had been fascinated by solar engineering since taking a course on solar energy at UVM. When he and Gardner met, he was working for a solar engineering firm in Burlington.

“Scott and I hit it off immediately,” he says. “We had a similar vision about what kind of business could make a positive change, so we made the leap and started Building Energy.” Ponzio came in as a partner, bringing his solar expertise to the mix.

Building Energy has its own administrative office and showroom in a completely separate section of the building Gardner put up 10 years ago for Northeast Construction. “We’ve heated with wood the whole time,” he says, proudly. “We have 7,500 square feet here, and we heat it for about \$800 a year; we have solar inverters for our electric power.”

An on-site testing facility tests types of insulation such as dense-packed cellulose and sprayed-on foam. “We do pretty much all forms of insulation except fiberglass, which is 40 percent less efficient than dense-packed cellulose.” It’s not unusual, he adds, to use more than one type of insulation on a project, depending on the design.

The reception area is the company's showroom, lit with daylight through a prismatic skylight. It is decorated with examples of the various products Building Energy sells, and a sketch of Pumpkin Hill, a co-housing community in Williston. "We purchased 100 acres of land three years ago, and slowly have been putting together the pieces of a little green community. We're going to teach people to grow and preserve food and market it locally. That's going to be the thrust of this community," he says.

Gardner's expertise is in conducting energy audits and analyzing the data, which are not always clear. "Efficiency Vermont often contracts our services to go look at a building that needs attention."

He laughs as he recalls a bit of unexpected notoriety. "Because I do experimentation on thermal imaging on buildings, one day I was taking infrared photographs of buildings out near the TD Banknorth building at Taft Corners. Within 24 hours, there was a government agent here in our offices wanting to know why we were taking pictures of their building." Fortunately, they left convinced of his innocence.

The current economy has made things tight. "Just like 1990, we're doing a lot of remodeling and working very hard to get jobs. We've been in business long enough, so I think we're going to be OK; people are still hiring us, even in this competitive market."

Last winter, he laid off three people, "which was painful," he says. "We just hired one of them back." An across-the-board pay cut was just restored, too, for everyone except Gardner.

He stresses that, for him, there is no separation between work and home. Some nights, he's not home until 8:30, he says, "but often, I will be home for dinner. And I took the weekend off — I'm not a workaholic!"

Carol, "an extraordinary person," is a preventive medicine physician with a practice in Colchester. "I do work a lot," he says, "and she does, too." For recreation, he does cross-country skiing, hiking, yoga, and meditation. "I love to visit with my friends — have a dinner and have people over. If anything could be said about what I would most want to do in my spare time, it would be to spend time with my two grandkids."

As for the future, Gardner makes two points. In Vermont, he says, we have all this wood, "and so much of our state isn't going to have natural gas. We have to be thinking about what's going to happen to our economy when gasoline is \$10 a gallon — and that's coming. So we are sticking with pellets, and we're on the cutting edge with it.

"The other is that we need to grow so the people in the company can grow. Our plan is to expand into New York; we're already doing quite a bit of solar and some thermal work there, and we're planning to start advertising there this month."

A mission, indeed. He's just finished insulating his mother's house, he says, adding, "If you get to know me, I'm going to want to insulate your house." •



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