

# GRADES OF GREEN

YOUNG NONPROFIT DISPLAYS MATURE ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT ANNUAL FUNDRAISER

**E**nvironmental education nonprofit Grades of Green may only be two years old, but you'd never have known from its polished, packed "Verte" fundraiser at the LEED-Gold certified Annenberg Community Beach House in Santa Monica on April 27.

Based in Manhattan Beach, California, Grades of Green is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to providing parents, students and educators with the tools to inspire and empower K-12 school communities to develop a more responsible relationship with the environment. A recipient of the U.S. EPA's coveted Environmental Award, Grades of Green currently has more than 66,000 students in over 100 schools across 19 U.S. states, Canada and Australia.

Hosted by award-winning reality TV producer J.D. Roth (co-creator and announcer of NBC's *Biggest Loser*) and attended by celebs including actress Haley Pullos (*General Hospital*) and Ryan Ochoa (*iCarly*, *Pair of Kings*), Grades of Green's second annual Verte fundraiser - "verte" translates as "green" in many languages - honored individuals and organizations who have helped make their numerous programs such a success. These included environmental advocate and former teacher Ranae DeSantis; Wells Fargo (which sponsors Grades of Green's programs in inner-city schools); and the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County (which sponsored a Trash-Free Lunch Challenge in numerous area schools resulting in the annual diversion of 18,000 pounds of landfill waste). Singer/songwriter Gregory Alan Isakov provided a tasteful musical interlude at the event.

Grades of Green's roots reach back to 2007 to when four mothers of students at a Manhattan Beach elementary school - Suzanne Kretschmer, Kim Martin, Lisa Coppedge and Shaya Kirkpatrick - joined other parents in volunteering to find ways to "green" that school. Word of their efforts spread around the district and when the four scheduled a meeting with a city council member to discuss their ideas, they found the room filled with interested parties including representatives from all seven Manhattan Beach schools and from the City Council.

"It was really our first indication that we had struck a chord," says Martin, a former environ-

mental lawyer and Grades of Green's Director of Communications. "And that's basically a good analogy of what has happened to us ever since: word just keeps spreading and so, before we were even a formal nonprofit, we were winning awards we weren't even seeking."

Grades of Green became a nonprofit in 2009, and on Earth Day 2010 launched its innovative website. The four co-founders share the role of executive director, making decisions as a team, while Coppedge serves as Director of Programs; Kretschmer as Director of Operations and Kirkpatrick as Director of Events and Outreach. As well as a board of directors/advisors, Grades of Green also prides itself on having a 16-strong Youth Board of Advisors ("To make sure our program is serving the kids - that's who we're here for," says Martin.)

**"Our dream vision would be for Grades of Green to be the go-to organization for environmental education."**

"Our goal then was the same as it is now - just to make it possible for other people to replicate what we were doing," Martin explains. "Because we would have loved a resource like this when we were starting out, and there weren't any."

In short, Grades of Green is a web-based program, free to schools, that will capture metrics for all aspects of environmental stewardship (including trash, electricity, water, paper, chemical, and emissions reductions), as well as empowering children to utilize what they have learned about environmental sustainability in their school communities to make a lasting, global impact.

"I just believe that there's a whole army of people across the United States that feel the same way we do," says Kretschmer. "[And] our site makes it easy; it makes it not overwhelming. There's an incredible need for it."

The Grades of Green program centers around five main initiatives: Trash Redux (trash reduction); Walk the Walk (emissions reduction); The Green Shake (environmental education); R3 Project (chemical, water, electricity, and paper reduction); and Operation Greenation (Global Outreach). Within these initiatives are numerous tools and activities, for

which the Grades of Green website contains specific step-by-step instructions, including photos, video clips, and pertinent statistics to help educate and motivate volunteers.

"We have a little over forty activities on our website," says Martin. "All one has to do to have access to the really simple - and free - how-to's is simply to register yourself and your school."

Grades of Green's flagship activities are Make a Difference Mondays (do something Monday to help the environment); Trash-Free Tuesdays (bring a lunch to school that doesn't generate trash); Walk to School Wednesdays (walk or wheel to school); [De]Tox Thursdays (spotlight toxic chemicals); and Freaky Fridays (how students can get involved with global causes).

At the Verte event, Grades of Green students and educators were on hand to provide live

saved every year.

Verte sponsors ranged from large multinational corporations to local businesses, and included Chevron, Republic Services (which has also partnered with Grades of Green to provide education on recycling and composting to nearly 1,100 schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District), Earth Friendly Products, LA carGUY and American Capital Corp. Exquisite beverages for the evening's guests were contributed by green-minded companies and restaurants such as Phifer Pavitt Vineyard, The Strand House, Mucho Ultima Mexicana, Shade Hotel, Rock'n Fish, Game Changers, Cismontane, Silver Oak, and O.N.E. Coconut Water. Limited-edition Energy Muse bracelets, featuring Grades of Green's Earth-shaped logo, were handcrafted especially for the event. Verte's sustainable swag bags contained innovative eco-products courtesy of Murad, Snooty Roots, Mixt Studio, Eco Nadel, Mixed Bag Designs, and BrandVia, as well as companies helping students pack a trash free lunch, such as Go Green Lunchbox, Pouch Pals, and Wean Green.

The Verte event also featured a "Fund a School" auction; and a slide show and video defining the environmental challenges Grades of Green is addressing, how it is responding to these, and showing children actively participating in (and enjoying) the organization's initiatives.

"The first and most important [goal for Verte] was to raise funds, because if we don't raise funds we can't do the work," Martin explains. "Another goal of the event is to raise awareness in the community and throughout the world about our vision, our mission, and the work that we're doing - and how people can get involved."

Grades of Green's co-founders have lofty ambitions for the organization, but their rapid strides to date make these absolutely credible.

"We've talked about it being a household name like Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts," says Kretschmer. "Our dream vision would be for Grades of Green to be the go-to organization for environmental education."

*To learn more about Grades of Green or to make a donation visit [www.gradesofgreen.org](http://www.gradesofgreen.org) (Grades of Green estimates that less than 10% of its 2012 fundraising goal of \$510,000 will be used for indirect costs - meaning that the bulk of donations go directly to implementing its program in schools nationwide)*



J.D. Roth and Haley Pullos



Grades of Green co-founders (l to r): Suzanne Kretschmer, Shaya Kirkpatrick, Kim Martin, Lisa Coppedge