

Think Global, Act Local

Change is closer than you think.

Climate change often feels like the kind of problem that's easy to feel paralyzed by. The scale is huge, the politics are frustrating, and most solutions feel abstract and out of reach. Gary Hedden's answer to this feeling of helplessness is pollinator gardens in back yards, and before that, 500 trees, one at a time, over five years. Hedden is one of the presidents of Greentown Los Altos, a small nonprofit with a "hyper focus" on Los Altos and Los Altos Hills. Before that, however, he worked as a pharmaceutical chemist who spent his career at Syntex working with what he casually describes as "massive amounts of toxic chemicals," helping develop the first scaled-up batches of Aleve. He explains how his interest in environmental issues sparked in college at the University of Oregon, where he and a partner wrote a report on the mill race that ran through his campus and dried up every summer. He states the report was handed to "nobody", yet it was an interesting project that made him realize the need for environmental action was rising. "Don't wait until you retire like I did," Hedden said. "Get involved now. While there's still time."

Planting the Seed

Greentown Los Altos isn't a huge organization; it's a small, volunteer-driven, nonprofit that runs almost entirely on community effort and getting people involved. Its focus is deliberately local, which Hedden sees as a strategy and not a limitation. Rather than investing in abstract, long-term goals, Greentown zeroes in on the specific environment that its members actually live in. Creek and beach cleanups that restore local ecosystems, bike events that reduce car dependency, and "eating green" programs that encourage residents to shift toward plant-based diets. None of these makes national headlines. Yet each one fosters significant changes for improvement in the immediate environment and the people participating. This sense of community and "I did something and I can see it" is exactly what national and global climate efforts often fail to provide.

It is true that large-scale climate policy is necessary, but it's also slow, complicated, and easy to feel disconnected from. Like it's not your problem. It happens in rooms most people will never be in, driven by negotiations most people will never follow. This is where local organizations operate differently. They show up in your neighborhood and encourage you to act on a personal level. The commitment is low, the impact is visible, and the community built around it is real. This sense of importance can help completely change mindsets, something Hedden believes deeply. "[Everyone] should feel directly affected. And once they realize how affected they are, they will care, I believe. The environment is all around us. We live in this environment. This is us." Hedden lives by this. During his interview, he mentioned how he sets up his chairs on the patio facing the bird feeder outside, watching and listening to the birds by their distinct sounds and patterns. It's a small thing, but it exactly shows his point. Climate change isn't always something happening somewhere else, like in a rainforest or a melting ice cap thousands of miles away. It's in your backyard, on your street, in the creek running through your neighborhood. This makes it extremely significant for people to start noticing it, really noticing it, so that it becomes harder to ignore. That shift in awareness, Hedden believes, is where environmental action actually starts.

Community-driven efforts have become increasingly important as larger systems continue to fall short. Climate pledges get made and broken, and often, there are no real consequences when they are. According to an article from the MIT Climate Portal, written by Kathryn Tso, under the Paris Agreement the main formal consequence for a country failing to meet its climate targets is simply a meeting with a committee. There is, as her interviewee Michael Mehling, Deputy Director of the MIT Center for Energy and Environmental Policy Research, puts it, “not much formal accountability.” This *allows* countries to avoid responsibility, creating serious long-term issues. According to a 2025 Stanford study, the number of countries with organized groups actively working to *oppose* climate science and policy has more than doubled over the last 35 years, meaning resistance to climate action isn’t just a political obstacle, it’s a growing global movement. Federal protections get loosened and the gap between what governments promise on climate change and what they actually follow through on keeps growing, and local organizations are left picking up the slack. That gap is where organizations like Greentown Los Altos choose to fill. Not in policy debates or global negotiations, but in the physical spaces where people actually live. One of the clearest examples of this is in the work that grew out of Hedden’s 500 Trees Campaign. What started as a long-term effort to restore canopy cover in the community eventually evolved into something much more collaborative. Hedden, with Greentown Los Altos, now organizes pollinator garden and tree planting projects, designed to support local biodiversity in more personal and targeted ways. Young volunteers, often students from local high schools like Mountain View High School and Los Altos High School, help prepare soil, plant native species, and build protective structures to help the gardens survive in residential yards. Hedden and the house owner begin with choosing plants that are native to the area, selected to attract pollinators like bees and butterflies, while also accommodating to the owner’s personal decorative landscaping preferences. Volunteers help with the entire process from start to finish—digging and loosening compacted soil, laying out the plants in specific arrangements, and making sure the garden functions like a real, connected ecosystem. Once planted, materials like mulch and small wire guards are added to protect young plants from weeds and pests while they establish roots. Over time, these yards begin to shift in function, from simply maintained outdoor spaces to small habitats where pollinators can feed, rest, and move through the neighborhood.

The Next Generation

These types of hands-on projects are what create visible change and what make local environmental work so effective. It turns climate action into something people can physically participate in rather than just talk about—or worse, do nothing about. What stands out even more, however, is who is increasingly doing this kind of work. These student volunteers dedicate hours of their time and weekends to coming out and actively trying to make a difference. For many students, participation can initially feel like just another obligation—required volunteer hours, or friends encouraging them to attend an event they don’t really care about. But repeated exposure to these projects often changes that relationship. Over time, students begin to see the immediate impact of their work, and what started as a requirement can develop into a real sense of responsibility towards the environment. This shift matters because it demonstrates how the younger generations’ involvement is becoming a monumental part of how local environmental efforts are sustained and expanded.

At Mountain View High School, Sierra Haik, the president of the MVHS Greenteam, represents this growing role of student involvement in environmental action. For many students like Haik, joining an

environmental club starts with something much simpler than a passion for the planet, whether it's for resume building or just wanting to spend time with friends. "I've always cared about the environment, so I joined Greenteam my freshman year to get involved and learn more about it," she said, "but I also joined as a way to make friends." Now, as the current President of the club, Haik's journey reflects exactly what happens when students stay involved long enough to see the impact of what they're doing. As president, Haik has helped Greenteam grow into something much more than a school club. What started as a group of students mainly showing up to beach cleanups and campus events has expanded into a broader effort to bring environmental awareness to the wider community. A large part of what the club does is not only cleanups or planting projects, but also going directly to local elementary and middle schools and teaching younger students about what's actually happening to the environment. Haik believes that environmental education, especially for younger students, is one of—if not the—most important factor in spreading awareness about climate change. Yale researcher Anthony Leiserowitz notes that most people, especially students, don't engage with climate change because they associate it with scientists, politicians, and environmentalists rather than people who look and think like them. That shift from seeing climate change as "their" issue to "our" issue, he argues, is where public action actually begins. And that is exactly what Greenteam's outreach to younger students is working to create. The younger generation is the one who will be living with the long-term consequences of climate change. It is up to them, more than anyone else, to step up now and make a difference. That is why environmental education is so important—because it allows the youth to develop a personal connection to climate solutions. According to a 2020 study cited by Columbia Climate School, if just 16% of middle and high school students worldwide studied climate change, it could result in cutting almost 19 gigatons of CO₂ by 2050. Haik feels this urgency personally. "We need to start acting now before it's too late. Some will say that it is already too late, but I think we still have a chance at [making change] with what we have left." And that change is already visible. Through Greenteam's outreach presentations, local elementary and middle school students are learning things that are essential to being environmentally aware. Over time, Haik noticed that this impact was starting to speak for itself. As Greenteam continued to present to more schools, the younger students were already knowledgeable about the climate change facts being covered. This is a direct result of Greenteam members consistently showing up, teaching, and proving that environmental education at a local level actually lasts. Additionally, these elementary and middle schools now have compost bins installed, students are actively sorting and recycling their waste, and some schools have even started their own junior Greenteam clubs. "Even just seeing what we've done as Greenteam, local elementary and middle schools now have compost bins, they are recycling, they're sorting their trash," Haik said. "In the scope of the world, probably not that much [of a difference], but in the scope of the bay, there's been a lot, and it has reduced carbon emissions by a lot." Haik is right, composting alone has measurable impacts on the environment through diverting organic waste from landfills and reducing methane emissions. Moreover, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency states that composting improves a community's ability to adapt and stay resilient through improving soil water and carbon holding capacity. Both of these characteristics prevent pollution runoff during floods and allow more carbon to sequester in soils, decreasing further emissions.

This work is extremely significant, however, getting students to consistently show up isn't always easy. Haik is candid about one of the biggest challenges of running an environmental club in the Bay Area: the pressure students face to treat every extracurricular as a resume line. "In the Bay Area, there's so much pressure for students to just do things for their resume," she said, "so getting students who actually want

to be a part of Greenteam to help the planet has been difficult.” Her approach to this is quite simple. She brings snacks, gets friends to come, make it feel less like an extracurricular and more like something worth doing on a weekend. And slowly, it becomes effective. Showing up just to be with your friend ultimately shifts into something much more. Students begin to see the impact of what they’re doing, and that visible change is what keeps them coming back. The community builds around the work, and the work is strengthened by the community around it. Together, they both grow stronger.

Making a Difference

That ripple effect is ultimately what connects everything Hedden and Haik are doing. The problems are enormous, and the solutions can feel small by comparison. But they are real, visible, and happening right here across the community. Both Hedden and Haik have shown that change doesn’t have to start at the top or overnight. “Educating yourself is probably the most important thing,” Haik said. “If you can gain a better understanding of what’s going on in the world around you, you can make a difference through that.” The climate crisis can definitely feel too big, too political, and too far gone to do anything about it. And as the gap between what needs to happen and what is actually happening continues to grow, that feeling isn’t entirely false. But local action is already here, already working, and already proving that people don’t have to wait for the world to figure itself out before they do something. Individual efforts alone won’t solve climate change. But they are a start, and right now, that start is more urgent than ever.