

Energy Trailblazers of the Month:

“My wife dislikes air conditioning for a host of good reasons and we rarely turn it on,” says Joe Gitchell of Chevy Chase, MD, who holds A/C in slightly higher esteem. “Fortunately, she does appreciate that true heat waves (multiple days when night-time temps don’t dip below 80 degrees) merit some air conditioning. Even then there are some ground rules – “we don’t set it below 78, and we use ceiling fans to augment the benefit of the dehumidified and cooled air.” At first Joe wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of less-than-robust air conditioning - and would lobby on behalf of the two house cats to turn it on more frequently for their sake. But Joe was curious about what they would save and how comfortable the house could be without lots of A/C.

Joe and his wife Elizabeth Mumford installed a ceiling fan in each of their four bedrooms, a thermostat controlled attic fan, box fans in second floor windows to circulate the air through the house. They also use a small desk fan when working from home. This experiment started over ten years ago and has continued because it doesn’t feel like a sacrifice and saves both energy and money. “Plus by losing the noise of the A/C and gaining the ability to keep the windows open, we stay in physical contact with the outside world as opposed to being cut off, which we both love,” Joe added.

For Joe and Elizabeth air conditioning is emblematic of how they approach making their home less wasteful and more pleasant. “We’ll try a lot of things and if they work out – great. If not, then we’ll reverse course and try something else,” Joe explains.

Some other things that have worked: adding attic insulation, hanging rather than drying clothes, trading in a top load washing machine for a high-efficiency front loader, replacing both the domestic hot water heater and boiler with tankless models and, once upon a time, using cloth diapers for their two daughters.

- Attic insulation – Added additional insulation into the floor of their attic and saw about a 20% decrease in their heating costs during winter months. Joe recommends the company he hired, Efficient Home LLC, to complete the work.
- Hanging wash instead of drying it – After spending time in Japan where almost all laundry is dried on a line, Elizabeth brought that practice back to Chevy Chase and Joe adopted it enthusiastically – as a simple way to save energy and “get back to basics.” They do this year-round with a retractable 5-line clothesline outside and with compact Japanese “hangers” suspended from exposed pipes in the basement inside during the winter.
- Tankless water heater – When their conventional water heater was on its last leg, the family upgraded to a tankless model which heats water on demand rather than in a holding tank. “We never run out of hot water and it will never flood the basement, plus it doesn’t waste energy heating water before it needs to be used,” Joe says. They used John C. Flood and purchased a Rinnai system. In addition, they used a similar model to replace their aging boiler (furnace). These units are smaller than their old ones, providing more usable space in the basement.
- In addition, Joe and Elizabeth participate in the Chevy Chase solar coop, Common Cents Solar, cofounded by neighbors Ketch Ryan and Kirk Renaud. Through the coop, the family added a solar hot water heating system (DAWN Solar), which uses solar energy to preheat water for domestic use.

The family continues look for ways to keep things simple and make their home more comfortable and energy efficient. “As a friend says, ‘the goal is to do the right thing at least 51% of the time,’ and we’re constantly trying new things, seeing what works for us and what doesn’t,”

Joe notes. This effort includes installing a rain barrel (a first step in a broader plan to reduce water use), composting kitchen waste, and using a traditional push lawnmower, which is currently getting rave reviews.

Got a story to share about reducing energy waste at home? We want to hear it. Email climatetocc@gmail.com to tell your story and share your experience. This story was written by Ian Halperin of Larkspur Energy, which is working with the Climate and Environment Committee to spread the word about energy efficiency in our Town.