



Lauren Sullivan: Making Green Connections

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Michaela Cavallaro

Some moments of inspiration come while gazing out at mountain vistas or floating slowly down a verdant stream. For Lauren Sullivan, inspiration arrived in a more mundane moment: while she was washing dishes at her kitchen sink. An activist who'd spent her career working for environmental organizations, Sullivan felt she hadn't ever found exactly the right fit. "I'd worked on very David versus Goliath campaigns, and very local campaigns, and I wanted to be someplace in between," she says.

At the time, Sullivan was working as a community organizer in Brooklyn, helping communities advocate for and reclaim their parks and green spaces. As she scrubbed pots and pans,

she kept returning to ideas that had been percolating for months. She and her husband, Adam Gardner, had talked about finding a way to work together. Gardner plays guitar for the band Guster, and spent much of his time on the road. Rather than jumping into an entirely new industry, it seemed logical to find a way to use their existing expertise and contacts. "The idea of connecting nonprofits with the music industry kept poking at me," Sullivan says. "It finally coalesced while I was washing dishes."

The product of Sullivan's inspiration: A new nonprofit that would magnify the voices of nonprofit environmental organizations by bringing them in front of the enormous audiences that attend rock

// We're doing our best to make the world a better place. //





and roll shows. Not long afterward, Gardner's sister sent them a pamphlet for an organization called Green Highway, which brought environmentally friendly organizations and technologies to Bonnie Raitt concerts—and helped provide biodiesel for her tours. Created by Raitt and her manager, Kathy Kane, Green Highway provided a model for what Sullivan and Gardner wanted to accomplish. So Sullivan drummed up her courage and cold-called Kane. "A little while later, we sat down with Kathy in L.A., and she ultimately offered to become our fiscal sponsor through their non-profit, Aria Foundation," Sullivan says.

Gardner and Sullivan named their organization Reverb and began contacting artists with whom Guster had toured. In 2005, they kicked things off with tours by Alanis Morissette and Barenaked Ladies. For those tours, Reverb set up an "Eco-Village" featuring environmental displays and information for fans, as well as tables from local and national environmental groups. Reverb volunteers promoted the use of carbon offsets to lessen the impact of fans' travel to the concerts, and helped reduce trash and increase recycling at the concert venues. And Sullivan coordinated the delivery of biodiesel for the tour buses from beginning to end of the tour.

Today, Reverb's website, www.reverb.org, features a running tally of the organization's impact. As of late November 2009, Reverb had greened 81 tours and 1,300 events, reduced 67,000 tons of carbon dioxide, involved 1,783 environmental groups and—the kicker—reached more than 10 million fans. The numbers provide a tangible way for Sullivan and Gardner to track their progress. But Sullivan is equally

interested in the anecdotal feedback she receives. "I love hearing from an artist that it's added a positive element to their touring experience," she says. "It's great to hear that an individual fan had an "a-ha" moment, or that a local nonprofit was able to sign up 50 new volunteers."

Sullivan, who is 35, also measures her own progress in terms of Reverb's sustainability as an organization—something that's become increasingly important since she and Gardner had their daughter, Sloan, three years ago. These days, Reverb boasts a year-round staff of six, including Sullivan and Gardner. (They hire additional staff to provide tour support during the summer.) Sullivan works part-time, focusing largely on behind-the-scenes details such as financial oversight, development, governance and legal with some biodiesel coordination thrown in for good measure. "I used to be on the road running tours," Sullivan says. "It's so much fun to be out there, but you're working from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m., then you sleep on the bus and do it again"—a schedule that's not particularly conducive to life with a young child.

While Sullivan feels somewhat bittersweet that her days of staffing tours are over, she draws comfort from the knowledge that she's working within an organization that creates tangible change. That example, she says, is one of the most important things she can provide for Sloan. "We want her to know that we're doing our best to make the world a better place," Sullivan says.

How are you making the world a better place? Tell us.

