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## Environmental Excellence Award recognizes efforts to ban gas-powered leaf blowers

By Sharon K. Sobotta

Jennifer Renton's children -12-year-old Finn and 10-year-olds Scout and Jamie - aren't the kind of kids that take no for an answer. And Renton couldn't be more proud.



It's that persistent pushback that earned the trio of siblings one of the two Environmental Excellence awards from the Lafayette Environmental Task Force and recognition at the Lafayette City Council meeting on Nov. 22.

During the virtual learning period of the pandemic Renton said her children were very distracted both by the sounds of leaf blowers, which made it difficult for them to hear their teachers online, and by the fumes that the gas-powered blowers emit, making it hard for at least one of them (with asthma) to breathe.

Image provided

"They started to do research and learned that on top of being very noisy, leaf blowers are extremely bad for the environment," Renton said. "The fumes coming off of a half hour of running a leaf blower would be the equivalent of letting exhaust run for three hours into your open window."

The Renton kids found that some 60 California towns including Palo Alto have already banned gas-powered leaf blowers and they want Lafayette to join the trend. The children wrote letters making their case for pivoting away from gas-powered leaf blowers to neighbors, the superintendent and anyone who would listen. While the children's vision of banning gas leaf blowers has been well received by many, Renton said some like the school superintendent needed some convincing.

"The superintendent said no at first, because he said that people may slip on leaves. (The siblings) emailed a principal in Palo Alto and asked if any children had ever slipped on leaves. (The principal) said no-never in the past 15 years," Renton said. "Then they checked in with a pediatrician and asked if they'd ever treated anyone who'd slipped on leaves. She said no (and affirmed the fact that children are far more likely to slip on monkey bars." This prompted Renton's children to go back to the superintendent again with new information. "(They told him that if safety was the priority) monkey bars should be banned because they are far more dangerous than leaves." Renton appears to be right. There are around 80,000 documented monkey bar injuries in the United States each year in children under 16, according to a 2020 Biomed Central study. No leaf injuries were noted.

After the children did their research, they introduced their case for banning leaf blowers to the Lafayette City Council and shared it with the Lamorinda community last January. Renton said her children continued writing to the city council and members of the community began writing in support of their cause. The children didn't stop their efforts in Lafayette. They also shared their concerns with Sen. Diane Feinstein and California Gov. Gavin Newsom. "When Gavin Newsom announced the ban of (gas-powered ) leaf blowers by 2024, my kids threw a loud party."

Where is it that the Renton children get their persistence from? Renton said it may be a number of factors. The family has traveled extensively and moved to Lafayette from South Africa seven years ago.

"I think there's something to be said for coming to a new place and having to start from scratch and having a strong work ethic," Renton said.

In the family's extensive world travels, Renton said they had never witnessed the quantity of leaf blowers they've seen, heard and smelled in Lafayette. Renton says they didn't quite understand the root of Lafayette's dislike of leaves, which she points out can serve as mulch or can be contained with a good old fashioned rake or an electric blower. On an environmental level, the Rentons are a one-car family and are already invested in reducing their own carbon footprint. "I don't drive them to school every morning just because it's a little cold," Renton said. "Unless it's raining, they cycle to school on their bikes."

Environmental Task Force Representative Nancy Hu recognized Finn, Jaime and Scout Renton for their activist grassroots outreach efforts to neighbors, the school district and the city to address the use and proliferation of gas powered electric leaf blowers at the Nov. 22 meeting. "Because of their efforts and

because of the multitude of public comments the ETF is working on an ordinance to restrict gas leaf blowers and plan to have language for the city next year," Hu said while presenting the Rentons with an Environmental Excellence award. Hu had nominated the Rentons for the award and was glad the rest of the committee agreed they deserved it. "Given that there are more than 100 cities that have banned or restricted (gas leaf blower) use ... I think it's time Lafayette did something about them."

The children thanked the Environmental Task Force for their award, adding, "We hope Lafayette will join other cities in banning leaf blowers."

The Environmental Task Force will recognize Project Earth, the other recipient of the Environmental Excellence Awards at a future meeting.

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