



# BEING BRILLIANT

*By Stacy Booth*

**F**or P.S. Reilly, there is more than one shade of green. P.S. is a sustainability expert who works with businesses, utilities and communities with strategic sustainability and all things green. P.S. has three main green classifications when it comes to people and firms—golden greens, light greens and brilliant greens. Golden green people are “folks where green is a core ethic,” says P.S. “They really have this belief in the environment and you really should do as much of this as possible and then some.” On the opposite end of the spectrum are the light green people—those that range from somewhat interested to reluctant to adopt green habits, looking for the quick checklists of easy things to implement. “It used to be that those seemed to be the only two choices,” says P.S. “But now there is a growing sense that, like information technology, sustainable technology is a new market wave creating competitive opportunity. There is a whole new segment emerging that we called brilliant green.”

In fact, the Athena Institute, where P.S. is the CEO and president, helps communities, businesses and utilities on their way to brilliance. “It’s not a judgment call,” says P.S., “it just means that they’re looking at

it much more practically about the fact that there is a competitive opportunity with top line and bottom line benefits for them.” For her, and the institute, sustainability is “more value with less impact,” she says.

P.S. first recognized a new sustainability trend during the 1990s, when she was working in the IT and telecom industries. During that time, she was asked to help a regional utility company interested in telecommunications, her first exposure to the utilities sector. “I already started seeing then just how much the world was going to change and converge.” P.S. began to write and speak about the future of smart energy, and carried that belief over the next several years through consulting and into her roles in a venture capital firm and a large technology publisher. It was sometime in 2001 when P.S. says she decided she needed to jump into the sustainability world and help people working in energy, buildings and transportation to make changes happen.

“My core message from the start has been that you should be very progressive and also very practical,” she says. “There are a great number of folks (that) believe if you go green, by association it is more expensive, less practical, more risky. Our whole approach has been that we should actually be demanding

more of the things that we buy and look for more value with less waste and negative impacts.” P.S. says currently a lot of green rhetoric is focused on the impact side, but when you also look at ways to increase value you open up more opportunity. P.S. gives the example of building a house. To really mainstream green building, the house shouldn’t just be a religious quest to have the least impact on earth. Instead the house should function well and be the healthiest place to live for its owners, along with minimizing impact on the earth. “The nice thing about the world right now is there is so much energy and enthusiasm about this that there’s a massive amount of commercially available solutions that are economically valuable and environmentally sound—and actually more durable and secure and reliable.”

While currently the focus in sustainability is on energy, transportation, building and business practices, P.S. thinks the future brings even more sectors, including water systems, food systems and health systems. “The green element of this is just the first step in a bigger awareness that we should be demanding more out of the investments we’re making. We will experience a renaissance period for the next decade or more where we

reinvent a number of key areas in our lives." P.S. has helped communities, including the cities of Seattle and Portland, leverage sustainability and attract clean technology sectors, and is also working with Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, on issues surrounding sustainability. She's worked with major utilities and the California Energy Commission and with a number of leading firms on their sustainability strategies. She says she and her team are usually brought in to help accomplish goals involving innovations around technology and solutions or policies and approaches. "We understand what's possible; we understand where the short- and long-term strategic benefits are and how to take those and bring them into a particular situation." One large upcoming project that P.S. had a hand in is the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games. A quick browse of the games' Web site ([www.vancouver2010.com](http://www.vancouver2010.com)) shows just how many "green" things the committee is implementing. P.S. worked with the Vancouver Organizing Committee, the Provincial Government and General Electric to build a sustainability master plan framework for the games.

In addition to consulting work, the Athena Institute also organizes several events each year. This year, they are having a series of symposia around North America about brilliant communities—what the utility, development and building industries look like in sustainable communities. They will also hold another Green Tie Gala (one was held in 2007) at which Generation BE essay winners will be honored. P.S. says she established the Generation BE Foundation and it is so named because "I think some of the biggest challenges for some of my children are 'to be or not to be' and determining the definition of what it means to be a citizen." Generation BE held a regional essay-writing contest in 2007 that will expand nationally for this year. One winner each is chosen from middle school-, high school- and college-aged entrants. Last year, each winner received a \$1,000 scholarship and shared his or her winning essay at the gala. Essays were in the form of letters to business and government leaders about what should be driving their decisions to create a legacy for

the next generation. "It was very inspiring," says P.S. "The element of having kids tell you how they're trusting you to make decisions on their behalf—it brings it back home that that's really what it's all about."

P.S. and her husband, Gary, have three children of their own: two teenagers and a 4-year-old. P.S. says she enjoys speaking with corporate decisionmakers and mayors, but it is just as pleasing or even more enjoyable to see a difference being made in the next generation. She says after a recent conference she spoke at, she brought home a shower timer she had received and put it in the shower. "My 18-year-old came out after seeing it in there for the first time, taking a shower. He's my shower culprit. He came out and he told me, 'You know, I think that's a really great idea.' For me, that is just as meaningful and poignant as sitting down with a county commissioner and talking about big picture things that have to happen."

In addition to heading the Athena Institute and raising a family, P.S. is working on two books. Her first book, which is currently in negotiation with a publisher, focuses on the concept of striving for a brilliant future. P.S. says the basic premise is that it is not enough to be green in a world driven by economics. "It goes into buildings, talks about transportation, talks about utilities and more, dispelling some of the myths and hype to instead paint a path for what we're likely to see and what it's going to take to get there." Her second book, while not related to green issues, involves family issues and is just as important to P.S. She is working on the book with her 4-year-old daughter, Elora. P.S. says Elora loves cooking, and there was a eureka! moment when P.S. decided she should write a cookbook with her daughter. She says since then, the idea has evolved to also include her teenaged sons: "It's really about the lost art of raising kids in the kitchen. We know that eating together helps families, but we seem to have forgotten the value in cooking real meals together." Each chapter will incorporate recipes that tie into a theme, and P.S. plans to share personal stories as well, in an effort to show that even busy working parents can use the kitchen to "carry on

family traditions, help remember loved ones, help get your kids prepped to go out into the universe and teach them about nutrition."

P.S. says she hopes in the future that people start looking at the big picture. If, for instance, there is a decision to switch from gasoline to bio-fuel, the entire process, from start to finish, needs to be examined before that decision can be made to determine which fuel would actually be cleaner. "How much energy does it cost us? How much energy did we consume? How much water did we consume? How much have we shifted?" she says people need to ask. "Ethanol is a great example of that. We've started converting over for quite some time ... if you really look at it from end to end it is not as good economically, not as environmentally sound (and is) creating instability and insecurity." Since many of the large decisions that need to be made have design lives of 50 or more years, it's important they are practical and intelligent. "I just hope that in five, 10 years the world is a better place and that we have more insight about how to make it even better. With the way that my kids are being raised, not just by me but by their school systems and their peers, I'm pretty convinced they'll feel more compelled to contribute to improving the world around them."

Passionate about what she does, P.S. says it's an alignment of her head and her heart. Since she is a mother, she says she thinks about the legacy she's leaving behind for the next generation. Also, sustainability issues affect so many things. These issues are about energy, security, peace and addressing resolution between countries, environmental health and safety, and ensuring there are long-term structures to support economies. "For me, it's like I can feel both with my heart and with my head that the issues I'm picking are the ones that our generation and our era have to get right. So I just feel like I'm focused on really meaningful problems that are complex enough that they are intriguing to me. They are things that I can be passionate about."

For more information about the Athena Institute, visit [www.athena.com](http://www.athena.com) or [www.discoverbrilliant.com](http://www.discoverbrilliant.com).