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Building a new life — and taking it off the grid

By *Karl Knutson*

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The home of Christian and Jennifer Milaster, seen near Lanesboro on a recent winter day. (Submitted photo)

Editor's note: This is the first article in a continuing series on this topic. For more information on the project, check this Web site: www.lichtnstein.org

You could say Christian and Jennifer Milaster are building a new life for themselves.

In the purely physical sense, it's absolutely true. They are building a new home high atop a hill adjoining Lanesboro. But that's not the full story.

Their home will present a new way of life the Milasters are looking to embrace; a look at sustainability for the future. They are going off the grid, which in this instance means they will not only create their own electrical power, but will collect rainwater as well.

The couple, currently living in Spring Valley, have come up with a phrase — as well as a Web site at <http://www.lichtnstein.org/> — to describe what they're hoping to do: "Sustainable living and renewable energy. Comfortably."

That last word perhaps says the most about the project. Not only do Christian and Jennifer want to do their part in conserving resources for future generations, they want to show it can be done in a normal living style. Yes, "comfortably."

As to calling it Project Licht 'n Stein, Christian explains on the Web site:

"The name of our project is a play on words on the name of that little teeny-tiny European country — Liechtenstein (40,000 acres — two-thirds of it mountainous — with 30,000 people). But it is also a good description of the essence of our project. The German word 'Licht' means 'light' and the German word 'Stein' means 'stone' or 'rock.' In addition the 'n' is a typical American way of saying 'and' — as in rock 'n roll — and since Christian is from Germany and Jennifer is from America, it fits even more."

Their Web site also states:

So, what then is our project? Project Licht 'n Stein is actually a multitude of things...

- A mission to build a mostly self-sustained, energy-efficient, energy-conserving, year-round dwelling for a family of three to four.
- A concept of promoting and tapping into community.
- An experiment to demonstrate that sustainable living using renewable energies can be achieved at the same level of comfort and availability of technical appliances as a "standard" house.
- Following the motto: "Build the simplest thing that could possibly work," for example, that meets our requirements.

"It is our vision to — energy-wise — be more or less self-sufficient (beside use of some liquid propane) and to share our lessons learned, experience gained, and mistakes made with the community around our home and work as well as virtually online.

So here are the essential unusual design concepts:

- Passive solar design

- Rain water harvesting
- Wind generator
- Solar hot water heating
- Hydronic radiant in-floor heat

Background

First, let's get an idea of where this innovative twosome came from. Their tale is something of a love story that seems fated to have happened.

In 1988, Christian – originally from Hamburg, Germany – participated in a 10-week cultural relationship fellowship program near Richmond, Va., that was organized by the company with which he was completing a three-and-a-half-year electronics apprenticeship. It was during his stay at a high school that he met Jennifer.

They had a wonderful romance, but when he returned to Germany at the end of the exchange, they each went back to living their own lives.

Fast forward to nine years later. Jennifer, now in Columbus, Ohio – following three years in Holland – was dared to contact her long-ago friend. She e-mailed Christian.

At the same time Christian, now working for IBM, was, for the first time in nine years, back in North America on a two-week business trip to Toronto, Ontario.

"It was the Thursday before my free weekend," he recalled, "and I was so excited hearing from Jennifer that I sent her three e-mails in five minutes in reply."

The next evening Jennifer arrived in Toronto after a long trip through a blizzard on the Greyhound bus line.

"After spending 12 hours with Jennifer, I knew that I was not going back to my relationship I had back in Germany," smiled Christian. "I had met my soulmate."

Within half a year, he obtained a visa to work in the United States. Jennifer and Christian were married in June of 2000, the same month that Jennifer graduated from college with master's degrees in business administration and health administration. She had accepted an offer for a two-year fellowship with the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. Christian, with his background in information technology, project management and development, also got a job with Mayo. He's since become a principal engineer in the Division of Engineering at Mayo.

With the new jobs and a new house on the horizon, they went on a seven-week honeymoon, knowing that they probably wouldn't be able to afford a trip like that for quite some time.

Sustainable life

A number of factors drew the couple to seriously consider an off-the-grid lifestyle.

"Jennifer has always been interested in it," said Christian.

That interest was further sparked when she saw a PBS special on homes built from old tires rammed full of earth and set in a soil berm. This Web site gives more information on it: <http://www.earthship.org>

Meanwhile, Christian said he's seen the effect of many people living in a small area of land in his native Germany. He said, "The conservation of water and electrical energy comes with the scarcity of resources and the density of population in Europe."

Over 85 million people live in an area the size of Minnesota and Iowa, stated Christian, where the population of the two states is about 8 million.

"For me, recycling was ever present in Germany in the 1970s and '80s," he added.

With a smile Christian also noted what he called another driving factor, "Jennifer always dreamed of having a windmill."

He thought it was likely she felt that way from her time in Holland, where she saw many windmills along the coast of the North Sea. Next door neighbor Germany is the top producer of wind energy, producing twice as much as Spain and two-and-a-half times as much as the United States – or more than a third of the world's wind-generated electricity, Christian cited from statistics.

Plus, he stated, “You see a lot of the quaint windmills around here. It’s a very nice image.”

Another trigger in the move to live more sustainably was when Christian used a gift certificate given to him by his colleagues to buy the “Real Goods Solar Living Sourcebook.” If you needed the “goods” to make that life work, the product needed was almost certainly in that book. It also provided essential background information on how to design solar and wind-powered systems.

The Milasters also met people living a completely off-the-grid lifestyle: Eva Barr and Todd Juzwiak of rural Spring Valley.

“We were inspired by the way they live, so respectful of the environment, and they have happy, fulfilled lives,” stated Christian, who smiled as he said, “It’s admirable, but we like a hot shower.”

Thus, the word “comfortably” was added to their phrase describing their project.

Through Juzwiak, Christian also had the opportunity to see a timberframe raised for a house in the area. It was then filled with straw bales, layered with mud, to provide the insulation for the walls. It’s a type of home that’s been used since pioneers moved westward.

While he liked the ideas, “We were looking for something more conventional,” said Christian.

Lanesboro

The couple met people in the Lanesboro area when they participated in Rural Peacemakers activities as the country was gearing up for a war in Iraq.

“That got us into Lanesboro. We’ve now met 40 or more nice people we liked.” Christian said that was important to them, since the couple doesn’t have roots or family here.

“We discovered a community. It was refreshing,” he added.

As they looked for potential areas to build their house, they saw an ad for the land at Lanesboro. It was “remote, isolated, peaceful and quiet.”

Yet, Christian said Jennifer didn’t want to be too far from town. He laughed and noted they are three minutes from downtown Lanesboro.

Growing up in a large city, Christian said he always had a romantic idea of going out in the backyard and seeing all the stars in a dark sky. That looks to be a sure bet at the site of their new home.

It all worked out – and Project Licht ‘n Stein began.

“That we ended up here is serendipity,” said Christian.

He noted it’s the “best of both worlds. A rural place right in town.”

Then it was time to fully consider all aspects of their project. How would they get power, telephone, Internet and other necessities of a comfortable, off-the-grid lifestyle to the site? How large would the home be? Would they drill a well, or do something different for a water source?

A look at their Web site explains Project Licht ‘n Stein:

“An off-the-grid, off-the-furnace, off-the-well year round residence in southeastern Minnesota employing a wind generator and photovoltaic cells with batteries, passive solar design with radiant heating and rainwater harvesting.”

Editor’s note: We’ll look at the various aspects of the decision and construction process for this home in a continuing series. Look for updates in future issues. Check out <http://www.lichtnstein.org/> for online updates, or for further information send Christian an e-mail at curious@lichtnstein.org

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