

Where the Sun Always Shines

I am *positive* that my school has broken a world record for the most failed green projects. All those mixed up recycling bins, failed gardens, broken solar ovens have just gotten old.

At Ridgeview Middle School, teachers are trying to encourage students to create environmental change, and about thirty are actually contributing. Ever since gas cars were banned and city buses were replaced with electric trams ten years ago, the teachers have been on this “save the planet” kick, which I absolutely love. Saving the planet is my dream, and even though I’m only in eighth grade, I know I want to be an environmental activist. A knot in my gut twisted. What if I am the *only* one who cares, or the *only* one helping? What if our planet *dies*?

The school bell rang like a sudden clap of thunder, pulling me out of my spiral. Of course our planet won’t die, I assured myself. Think of all the sustainable initiatives our city has done: endless greenspace, wind turbines on every hill, solar farms, sand powered batteries—I can’t name them all.

I grab my textbooks and glide across the bamboo floors to science. I shuffle through the tightly spaced desks, hopelessly trying to reach mine at the far corner. Science is my favorite class. Mr. Prescott always ties our studies back to earth. I tuck my golden red hair behind my ears as I look around and spot my best friend Josie waving at me. I wave back with a smile, just as Mr. Prescott walks in.

“I have an announcement” he declares. I snap my eyes off the transparent solar glass windows to him. You can feel the anticipation in the air, like bubbles ready to burst.

“Ridgeveiw will be hosting a school competition called *Eco Week*. In one week, your group must create something that makes the school more sustainable.” My hand whips up at lightning speed, as if it has a mind of its own.

“Yes, Mabel,” he chuckles. I suddenly remember that this is a group activity, so I quickly lock eyes with my friends Josie and Caroline. We eagerly nod at each other; a silent agreement.

“Me, Caroline, and Josie would like to participate, please,” I beamed.

“Actually, Mabel, it’s *Caroline, Josie, and I* would like to participate.”

I blush. This is *so* embarrassing. Silent whispers that I know all too well consume the harsh atmosphere of these garden covered recycled plastic walls.

“I’m teasing you, Mabel. Yes you can. Sign ups are at the back.”

“Thank you, Sir!” I laugh.

Another clap of thunder pierces my ears. They’ve got to change this school bell! I gather my textbooks, stack my chair, and rush out the door without even saying thank you.

“Guys, guys!” I call after my friends. I spot them by my recycled steel locker, so I hastily jog toward them.

“Talk after school, I have an idea.”

School flies by quickly. All I could think about was my idea for Eco Week. I can't wait to meet with my friends.

We planned to meet in the Ridgeview pollinator garden at 4pm sharp. I'm sitting under a solar flower at 3:59pm when I hear exploding giggles. They are actually on time for once. I can't wait to share my idea!

“Hey guys!” I call out, waving them over. “Let's get to business!”

“Get to the point, Mabel.” Caroline blurts.

“Huh?”

“We know you have a cool idea, we saw it on your face at lunch. Just spill!” She laughs. She really knows me.

“Okay, what do you guys think of making a solar powered phone charging station?”

Something in the air shifted, in a good way. I think they like my idea.

“Let's do it!” they exclaim in unison. A smile spreads across my face.

“Ok, let's get started.”

I pull out my notepad and we draw tons of prototypes and finally decide on a design: held on a wooden bench made from wooden planks and screws, a solar panel will be connected to a USB cord through some simple wiring (which is too techy for me to understand, but apparently, it's possible).

One hour later, we grab our things and scurry to the electric tram stop. Our plan is to go to the local hardware store where Caroline's father conveniently works. It seems like mother earth is smiling upon us! The tram ride is silent with anticipation, hope. We stare out the windows, watching as the apartment buildings, greenhouses, and thrift shops move past us in a blur. After what feels like days, we reach the store.

Running inside, I pull out our checklist. We look at each other, nod, and split up. Rolling on shopping carts, we glide up and down the aisles, scanning the shelves like machines. We find everything we need: wooden planks, screws, and a solar panel. Josie already has a spare wire kit from Christmas and Caroline has a spare USB cord.

We rush to the pollinator garden and start assembling. I thought building the bench would be the hardest part, but Caroline has natural talent for construction, a gift passed down from her father. She didn't even get any splinters! Unlike Josie, who basically replaced her hand with a wooden one. We placed the solar panel down and Josie did the wiring.

In 30 short minutes, we were done, with just some finishing touches left for tomorrow! I've never been prouder of what I have accomplished today. We can always help the earth, and today, I *actually* did! I can't wait to rub this in the fossil fuel companies' faces.

I wake up to a glowing sunrise that fills my room with coziness. The claps of thunder came back, but this time, in real life. It rained all night. After a refreshing 10 hours of sleep, I was crazily running around, only having one orange juice before my tram arrived. From the moment I awoke to the whole ride there, I could only think about the project.

The hallway chatter has never been louder, buzzing with excitement. Countless projects being shown off: compost robots, water filter models, someone even turned their community home's roof into a green roof! The competition will be tough.

I trot along the stone pathway to the pollinator garden. Then I see it.

Caroline crouching down desperately trying to plug in her phone to the USB cord. A look of distress covers her face. Oh no.

"Caroline, what happened?" I call.

"It's not working, Mabel! I think the rain damaged it!"

Well, we only have one option, *right?*

"We have to fix it!" I say.

"We can't fix it, we have to start over, get more materials. Rain damage is too hard to repair."

"Then that's what we'll do."

"Are you sure? This already was a lot of work, and it's not mandatory."

"NO. I mean, don't sweat it, right? Look at what everyone else has done. We can't give up now! Meet after school, tell Josie, got to go." I don't actually have to, but I can't let her give up.

"Wait, wha-" I run faster than a cheetah to class. I feel bad for dragging Caroline along with this, but it's important.

By the time school is over, the sun has been rolled over by clouds.

"The first major British colonization effort began after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713..." the teacher's words disappeared in the black hole of my brain; information in, nothing out. The bell rings and I disappear into the hall. Running against the bamboo tiles, I slip against a pencil on the floor and fall flat on my back. This doesn't stop me. I get up and keep on running, not paying attention to the substantial amount of hands reaching down to help me up.

Josie and Caroline are waiting for me as I reach the garden.

"Hey Mabel, we want to tell you something." Uh oh.

"We think that you are being too controlling about this project. You won't listen. So, we decided to quit. Here." They hand me the broken solar bench, and quickly run off. I sit down on the bench under the solar flower. Am I being *controlling*? I can't believe that's what my friends think. I guess

this is just going to be yet another failed green project. This would have been amazing; reducing waste and completely eliminating fossil fuel usage when charging devices.

I hold the solar bench and study it. What exactly went wrong? I take a closer look and see that the wires have been damaged. There's no fixing that. I sigh and look at the garden. I spot my favorite flowers, tulips, at the far corner. I jump when I spot a long green hose at their stems, thinking it was a snake. I can see the shiny rain drops dripping down the hose from last night.

Wait. That's it! What if we get a tube to cover the wires to protect them from rain! That would work! I know Josie's younger brother Alex has the same wiring kit sitting around that he doesn't use. But...Josie and Caroline quit. I can't do this on my own. I need my team. I can't let this become another failed project. I pull out my phone and call them. Luckily, they both pick up. I explained to them the reason I was so controlling: helping the environment is important to me. I apologise and ask if we can work together again to finish the project. They agree. Yes!

I head to Josie's house to meet with them. Josie's house is loud, filled with the playful shrieks of seven year old boys. "Ooh, let's race cars!" "No! I wanna play the dinosaur game!" Caroline must be here already, I saw her father's electric car driving away. I knock on the door 11 times: it was our special code, the beat of the first part of Jingle Bells. Josie opens it with a smile, and we head to her room, a bowl of pretzels waiting for us. I flop onto her bed.

"Ok, here is my idea." They both look at me, eyes wide. "What if we use Alex's wiring kit to replace the old wires, and cover them with a pipe so the rain can't damage them?"

"That's a great idea! My dad has spare pipes in his workshop."

"And Alex will lend us his wiring kit. He's too busy playing video games."

It didn't take us long to finish the solar bench. Josie again did a perfect job with the wiring and Caroline and I added the protective pipe. We went outside and tested it, and even though it took ages, it charged my phone! I couldn't have done this alone. I am so thankful that I have my team.

"Bye!" I wave as my tram pulls to my stop.

I watch as the all too familiar city speeds past me. When I see the bright green of the roofs of my neighborhood, I start to pack up.

"I'm home!" I shout when I walk through my wooden door. The smell of fresh pizza welcomes me like a blanket.

"Hey Mabel, set the table, would you?" called my mother from the kitchen. It's only 5:30, but my mom is already ushering me and my sister to the table. I don't mind, I'm always in a pizza mood.

As we eat, I can't help but smile, thinking of the solar bench helping kids in the yard. As the sunset fades into night, the last bit of sunlight shines through the window, making me grateful for solar power. It feels good that, in our own little way, we made the world more green. Maybe that's what going green really means - that change doesn't start big, but it starts with us. I can't wait until the competition. And I am so glad I could do it here, with my friends, where the sun always shines.