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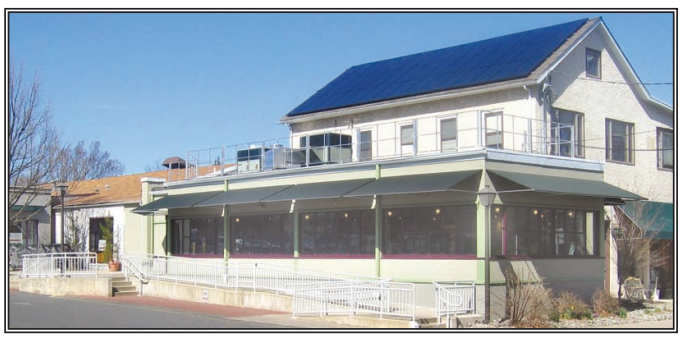
Whole Earth Gets a 21st Century Facelift

A Convenient Truth: *Whole Earth movers – Jennifer Murray, left, Susy Waterman, Herb Mertz, and Fran McManus – showcase the $1 million addition just completed at the landmark Nassau Street natural food market.*

Bill Moran, customer service manager, came to the Whole Earth Center from the Tempting Tiger.



When planning its addition, the WEC wanted a model of green construction. The windows are recycled, the roof is solar.

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REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE APRIL 2, 2008, ISSUE OF U.S. 1

The Whole Earth Center: Bigger and Greener

It's Only Natural: *Jennifer Murray, above left, scoops some herbs from WEC's vast supply of bulk foods. Annie Chang, right, a chef at WEC, brings fresh bread to its new cafe area.*

by Michele Alperin

Who in the world would go to the trouble of preserving the huge plate-glass windows of a former automobile dealership? Who would add a second layer of glass and a coating to create double-insulated panes to use in the expansion and renovation of a retail store? The Whole Earth Center, Princeton's oldest natural foods grocery store, that's who. And of course the socially conscious store used a company in the area, Norman's Glass and Auto Services, right up Route 27, beyond Kingston, to do the work.

The Whole Earth Center, which many of its loyal customers refer to as WEC (rhymes with "deck"), is opening a 2,500-square-foot totally "green" addition in the space that was last occupied by Judy's Flower Shop, but was originally an automobile showroom.

Nearly from its beginnings on October 12, 1970, in a 10- by 10-foot space at the current Nassau Street location of Thomas Sweet, the Whole Earth has been more than just a store that sells good, healthy food. It has been committed to advocacy and education on issues, from recycling and reusing to buying local and practicing integrated pest management. And, yes, the name did come from the Whole Earth Catalogue.

In its new transformation, the store almost belies its countercultural origins, visually at least. Just 20 years ago the Whole Earth's physical presence had an entirely different feel. The store entrance opened off a run-down hallway where signs alluded to fellow tenants with similar values, like the Holistic Health Association and the Sierra Club. On the walls were the store's community bulletin boards. Its French-style doors were completely covered with bumper stickers. "All your philosophies laid out bumper-sticker style," says Fran McManus, the Whole Earth's marketing director, a graphic designer who was trained at Parsons and the New School.

In its first years Whole Earth carried wood stoves and futons and its bulk food came in barrels. It was the focal point of a small alternative enclave in Princeton.

In its first years Whole Earth carried wood stoves and futons and its bulk food came in barrels. It was the focal point of a small alternative enclave in Princeton. "It was the center in a community looking for connections back to the environment, nature, and eating better," says McManus.

The Whole Earth staff includes Princeton pioneers in natural foods. Its baker, Harriet White, used to be the owner of the Green Line Diner, a Princeton natural foods restaurant in the 1980s, and its customer service manager, Bill Moran, and his wife, Carol Nyikita, owned the Tempting Tiger, a natural food deli on Witherspoon Street that catered to students from 1979 to 1993.

It all started with four barrels of bulk items — granola, rolled oats, brown rice, and lentils — and peanut butter, all of which sold out on the store's first day. And, by the way, wallet watchers should be aware that every year on Earth Day, these items still sell for their 1970 prices. Another money and earth-saving tradition in place since the beginning is the subtraction of 10 cents per bag brought in by customers from their final bill.

Whole Earth, fittingly enough, is an offshoot of the first Earth Day, in 1970. At that time several environmental activists heard that an ecological food store was opening in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and they started to talk about opening a natural foods store in Princeton. The original group included Barbara Parmet, Florence Falk, Margot Sutherland, and Hella McVay.

Susy Waterman, who attended Bennington College, where she majored in government, joined up the next day after getting a phone call in Maine about the idea, and has been on the board every since. She is married to Stan Waterman, the Emmy award winning underwater producer and photographer who is the author of Sea Salt.

The group spent the summer raising $4,500 in a campaign that included people

knocking on doors with children in tow. In exchange for the $5 and $10 that people handed over or mailed in, they were given little green cards.

The Whole Earth Center incorporated as a nonprofit, but it has an unusual status — it is nonprofit by virtue of its bylaws, but because the government won't recognize the store as a 501(c)(3), it pays taxes like a normal corporation.

The store moved to its current location about six months after its founding, and at the same time hired its first manager, John Keyser, a recent Princeton graduate.

Still standing on its original principles, the Whole Earth has transformed itself physically — not just to provide more product and an expanded cafe, but also to serve as an example to the Princeton community of green architecture and design. The new addition will open officially on Saturday, April 19, with a week-long sale and an Earth Day celebration on April 22.

The Whole Earth's addition brings the store to a total of 8,000 square feet, which now look out onto Nassau Street through those reused windows. The new space will house a bigger kitchen for the cafe. Its new manager, who was hired away from Whole Foods, will be expanding the menu. The new cafe will feature 10 two-seater tables that can be pulled together in different configurations, two new bathrooms — one with a shower for employees who bike to work, and wheeled display cases for deli-related package goods and cheeses. Making the best use of space, the display cases will be moved out of the way for evening lectures and talks.

The addition also makes room for additional bulk products, even though they don't bring in a high profit. Waterman doesn't like the term "bulk" and emphasizes that the idea behind these items is not to encourage customers to buy a lot, but to constantly turn over product so it is fresh.

The new space is also making way for changes in the older, cramped footage. The new deli kitchen means, for example, that the old kitchen can be turned over entirely to the bakery. Now baking will be a 24-hour-a-day operation instead of just a night-time one, and to aid and abet the expanded hours, the store has just purchased a new oven, doubling the bakery's physical capacity.

There is also be room for more product. The organic produce department is increasing by 50 percent to a little over 600 square feet. The new space also allows for more room in the aisles, which is expected to make browsing more pleasant.

The Whole Earth Center expansion is to serve as an example of green architecture and design.

The existing 36-foot product case has new racks to improve display and convenience as well as to enhance freshness. With that and the new 16-foot product case, the department is adding more variety in all its lines, from root vegetables to exotic fruit.

The produce manager, Mike Atkinson, points out that a larger inventory may sometimes improve prices: "With increased buying power," he writes in reply to an E-mail query, "we will also be in a position to get better deals at times, and will pass this on to our customers with seasonal specials and regular sale items." And with better buying power and storage capacity, the department will be supporting local farmers by increasing both the variety of locally grown items and the length of time the store is able to offer them.

The store's first major expansion took place in 1994 when it took over from Bowhe & Peare the space where the entrance currently sits. There have been other minor moves along the way. At one point, for example, the offices were moved upstairs to make space for the cafe.

Once the board had decided to take on this second major expansion, says Herb Mertz, a Princeton University graduate (Class of 1976) who works as an executive at Seacastle in addition to his duties on Whole Earth's board, it made a significant policy decision. "To be true to our roots," he says, "we wanted to do it in the most environmentally friendly way possible." The board knew enough about green building to guess that this would be an expensive way to go, but thought it would be worth it.

The U.S. Green Building Council had recently established standards for green building, dubbed LEED, for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, and because these were the strictest existing standards at that time, the board decided to adopt them.

The first step was to find a builder and an architect committed to green construction and design.

Although Jim Baxter of Baxter Construction Company in Princeton had never been involved in LEED, he realized LEED was an up-and-coming and important development in building and design. He was eager to get on board and willingly underwent several weeks of preparatory training in the Midwest.

Architect Ron Berlin, located at in the same building as the Whole Earth Center, was in the process of obtaining certification as a green architect, and he was chosen to design the addition. The cost for the work was $1 million. It was funded by Martin Tuchman of Princeton International Properties, the store's landlord, and by board members.

An early challenge was finding a company that would take care of construction debris, ensuring recycle or reuse where appropriate. After a search, Whole Earth's board located a Philadelphia company, Construction Waste Management, which brought in enormous cardboard boxes to hold the old materials.

The construction crew — labeled by McManus as "the heroes of this whole thing" — have diligently separated wood, pipe, copper tubing, and plastic. She explains, "It takes the kind of dedication these guys had to make it work. Once you throw the wrong thing in the wrong bin, the whole batch is contaminated and considered trash." The result was impressive, with 90 percent of the materials recycled.

The motivation behind the decision to take on this costly project was the desire to create a learning space that not only had lots of information available, but also taught by example. A sensor in the new space, for example, will allow visitors to see how much power is being generated by the solar panels on the roof. The space will also have available the latest editions of all magazines sold in store as well as an informational bulletin board.

The space also uses wood harvested locally both as finishing lumber and for the new cafe tables. When Kit Raymond, a tree surgeon in Princeton whose company is called Branch Manager, is asked to cut down quality hardwood trees, like the cherry, black walnut, and elm, he converts them into lumber. "People can come back and eat off their own tree," jokes McManus.

Many of the Whole Earth's customers have been around since the beginning. They are savvy about food and the natural foods industry and are looking for healthy food that is not processed and has no additives.

Sometimes it is possible to find this type of food in a standard supermarket, but only by carefully checking ingredients. But at the Whole Earth that's the staff's job, says Waterman. "Customers have to do less label reading than in regular grocery stores," she says. "They buy here because they don't have to ask." Mertz adds, "It's a haven for most of our customers."

When something creates fears about the food supply—for example, the use of Alar pesticides on apples, the introduction of bovine growth hormone by Monsanto, or a big recall of beef — more people get interested in organic food. And when these scares happen, the

Whole Earth always has lots of information on hand to help people understand what is involved.

The Whole Earth's customers are price conscious, just like everyone else, says Mertz, but generally they have a broader understanding of what prices reflect. When the Whole Earth buys from small, local organic farmers who are sitting on expensive farmland, for example, these farmers are able to continue cultivating the land rather than selling it to developers who will turn it into gated communities. "We are trying to support multi-use in the area and by supporting it we don't become a whole area of just McMansions," says Mertz.

Even though buying local can be expensive, Whole Earth's customers understand and appreciate both the quality of its products and its contributions to the organic economy. Waterman says about the Whole Earth's customers, "The more they understand what they are buying, the more they are willing to appreciate an increase in price."

And yet, as is true of other food sellers, the Whole Earth's prices are, in some cases, rising. Flour, for example, has tripled in price as farms are converted to corn for ethanol, causing shortages of wheat flour. But higher prices can sometimes work to the Whole Earth's advantage. "If you compare the price of packaged wheat to bulk organic grain, the bulk is less expensive," says Mertz. Furthermore, adds McManus, "the average bagged flour is three years old, so the bulk department is the way to go in terms of freshness." And the absence of packaging is good for the environment.

Another great deal at the Whole Earth is on its 170 bulk herbs and spices, which are very fresh because of high turnover and less pricey than the off-the-shelf variety. "Spice jars are the most expensive glassware in your house," says Waterman.

While local can be expensive, the Whole Earth's prices on many items are in line with or lower than those at the larger stores. A few years ago, when Waterman did a survey comparing the prices of 14 items at Whole Earth with those at grocery stores in town and on Route 1, she found that in 11 cases the Whole Earth's prices were the same or lower. Anecdotally, she adds, some customers have told her that many of the Whole Earth's products are cheaper than the same ones at Olive May (formerly Wild Oats), the Whole Foods-owned store just down the street.

Furthermore, the Whole Earth does not play the marketing game of offering loss leaders to create false perceptions of their true prices — offering one item at a drastically reduced price, but making up for that loss with a rise in prices elsewhere.

Recently the Whole Earth joined INFRA, the Independent Natural Food Retailers Association, which serves as a buying coop for independent stores around the country. Its members look at pooling resources for the purchase of traditional package items and swap insights into good deals on commonly-needed retail items such as software for signage.

Mertz says that prices at the Whole Earth are never set to gouge the consumer. "We don't have to extract the last amount of money from the store, because we are non-profit," he says. "So that moderates the cost structure we put on products."

Just as prices are always a concern, so is competition, and the Whole Earth has had to adjust. As each new store comes into the area — even Wegman's, which is not "natural foods," but is decidedly upscale — the store notices a dip in sales that gradually rises back to its norm over time.

When a national chain with high advertising visibility, like Whole Foods, comes into town, says Waterman, the Whole Earth has had to rethink the advantages of being small. Because the large stores need volume and consistency, they cannot work with very small producers. "It is difficult for a small supplier to have enough to feed the appetite of a large store," says Waterman. But the Whole Earth is more flexible. "We can handle a small business that produces fine products," she continues, "but it's too much trouble for a very big store; they count on mass."

Fully Invested: *Board members Susy Waterman and Herb Mertz have a passion for all that WEC stands for. They invested not only their time, but also their money, in the expansion.*

The cost of flour has tripled, but higher prices can sometimes work to WEC's advantage.

Wild Oats, says Waterman, was a serious threat when it came to town in 1998 — a national chain, two blocks away, that was bigger than the Whole Earth. "We had to sit down and figure out how to meet that challenge," she says. The store ended up getting advice from Community Mercantile, an organic food coop in Lawrence, Kansas, that had survived in exactly the same situation — a Wild Oats two blocks away, and produced a movie that explained how.

Whole Earth had to respond by making a few changes, like opening on Sunday and taking credit cards.

But it still meant a lot to the Whole Earth when Wild Oats had its last hurrah. "When Wild Oats went out, it was strange symbolic victory for us," says McManus. "We lasted."

The ethic of Whole Earth is, in many ways, community service, says McManus. This happens on several fronts: how the store deals with its suppliers, how it selects products, how it educates its customers, and how it reaches out into the local and national community to motivate social change.

One continuing issue has been how to support small suppliers and use their products. "We are one of the original 'buy local' companies, in terms of using suppliers and producers in the area," says Mertz.

"The hope is to help him stay in business so he produces good

stuff and so he doesn't get bought up by the big boys," says Waterman. The alternative, which often happens, is that the small farmer sells out or else buys more land, plants more crops, and becomes a large purveyor himself.

Whole Earth has worked for a long time with Farmer Ed Lidzbarski of E.R. & Son Organic Farm, who supplies the store with organic vegetables. After 20-plus years farming on rented land in Jamesburg, the land was sold, and he now farms in Colts Neck. "He is the guy who has trained most of the successful organic farmers in the state," says Waterman. And when he ran into trouble, the Whole Earth jumped into help. A number of years ago, when his organic vegetable crops washed out three times, the Whole Earth paid for his new seeds.

Sometimes distribution structure gets in the way of using products from small suppliers. "If you have a small product you want to offer, it's difficult to break into the supply chain," says McManus. The Whole Earth has its eye on a producer of frozen organic produce in the Pacific Northwest, for example, but hasn't figured out how to get it to New Jersey.

Not long ago Terra Momo and Whole Earth invited representatives from seven Princeton businesses and eight farms for quarterly farmer/buyer meetings. Their goal is to figure out how these businesses can work better with farmers so that their trips to town are easier and less expensive. Princeton University was represented by Stu Orefice, head of dining services, who is committed to using local first; the other businesses are the Bent Spoon, the Nassau Inn, Nassau Street Seafood, and Triumph Brewing.

Mertz says that Whole Earth has also helped out other local businesses that wanted to buy natural products but didn't have the volume to support delivery. Terhune Orchards, for example, wanted to switch to Natural-By-Nature milk, and Whole Earth bought some them as part of its own order. It also helped the Bent Spoon, which didn't have enough volume in natural eggs and milk for its ice cream.

Whole Earth's produce is all organic, and its deli offerings are all organic except for the lemon juice. The Whole Earth is always on the lookout for new products that manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors are offering. After assessing their benefits, the managers decide whether to carry them.

When organic food was rare, it was easy to make purchase decisions. Where Erewhon was one of the few original suppliers of packaged goods, now there are scores of suppliers. As a result, the Whole Earth's product managers are more selective, and have to ask themselves, "Is this a company we want to support?"

The Whole Earth chose as its primary dairy supplier a cooperative of Amish farmers in Lancaster County whose label is Natural-By-Nature for three reasons: (1) Its cows are grass fed, meaning that they get all their nutrition in the pasture — not, emphasizes McManus, by eating corn first and then being sent outside, where they mostly lie under a tree and sleep. (2) The time to market is only two hours. (3) They don't ultrapasteurize their milk to give it a longer shelf life.

Wild Oats was a serious threat when it came to town in 1998, causing WEC to expand its hours and to accept credit cards.

Or take the Equal Exchange Coffee that the Whole Earth carries, which is a "fair trade" product. The owner originally thought his company would be a regional one, supplying groceries and food stores throughout New England. His brand has ended up, however, being national, but it caters to natural food stores and coops, says McManus.

He runs his "fair trade" business by the following principles: He always pays a fair price to the farmer, including a guaranteed minimum when the market is low; he pays an extra premium for certified organic; and he provides advance credit to farmers during the growing season, when they need it. As a result, his suppliers don't have to go to predatory lenders and get stuck in a debt cycle. Equal Exchange has now started OKE Bananas, and the Whole Earth is the only store in Princeton that carries them.

During the growing season the Whole Earth buys mainly from local organic farmers, but off season it brings in produce from California. But that may be less true in the future. Waterman says, with some irony, "With climate change the growing season is getting longer and longer in New Jersey."

Periodically a product is controversial, and the board has to help product managers evaluate it. At one point the store decided to carry shark cartilage, which was supposed to offer health benefits, but which also represented a great danger to the well-being of sharks. "Shark cartilage is extremely expensive, and we did well with it," says Mertz. "A lot of cancer people came in." But when the board did its homework, they found no proof of the product's effectiveness but did find it that it was decimating the shark population, so they dropped the product.

Then there was the time that the company supplying most of the Whole Earth's health and beauty products was bought by a larger company that didn't have a policy on animal testing. Since all Whole Earth products must be cruelty free, they had to shut down that whole department for awhile.

One impetus for starting the store was to create a gathering place for people interested in change. With regard to pushing recycling, where the store placed some of its earliest advocacy efforts, Waterman explains that "we started to be a resource for the town to learn — where you start, what you do."

The store's activism ebbs and flows, says Waterman, and depends on finding a vigorous supporter of some issue. But its history speaks to its regular civic involvement.

It started with recycling — getting Princeton Borough to do curbside collections with one of its trucks, encouraging the university to support a recycling program, and lobbying the state government. In those days things weren't formalized, says Waterman. People had an idea and gathered local environmental activists to help make it happen — and the Whole Earth was the place to find them. "If you wanted to get something done," she says, "the Whole Earth is where you came to get it started. It is also where you went to find out what was going on."

Waterman describes what happened at an early recycling effort at the university. People drove on to the campus with their newspapers, paper bags, tin cans, and glass and dropped them at designated spots. She remembers her friend Denise Reed, who was very involved with the Whole Earth, standing on top of a dumpster, in the midst of a huge mound of glass, dressed in a big mask and goggles, whacking away at the glass with her sledgehammer. "She looked like the guy on Arm & Hammer," says Waterman.

In the early 1970s the Whole Earth wrote a bill at the state level to try to get recycling for glass, but it went down. When the recycling supporters arrived at the state house, they were faced with hundreds of glass company representatives from southern Jersey who worried that recycling would put them out of business. "We read our statements," remembers Waterman, "but we were beaten to a pulp."

In 1990, in honor of Earth Day, the Whole Earth organized a canal clean-up that turned up about 120 bags of garbage, roofing materials, a toilet, tires, shopping carts, and a road sign.

After the mess, there was cake for everyone at an Earth Day birthday party at Turning Basin Park. "It was a real turning point for the store," says Mertz. "People recognized that all these groups were doing

stuff but nobody was coordinating it."

In 1993 the store ran a pesticide-free lawn campaign in Princeton, distributing information and giving purple "Pesticide-Free Lawn" signs to homeowners who pledged not to use pesticides on their lawns. It also co-sponsored an in-store and door-to-door chemical-free lawn campaign with the New Jersey Environmental Federation to educate town residents about composting, recycling, and chemical-free lawn care, and petitioned Princeton Borough and Princeton Township to adopt a pesticide policy for public lands and buildings.

The Whole Earth initiated a project to push for integrated pest management in Princeton schools and parks. Rather than spraying for pests on a regular schedule, says Waterman, this means checking regularly for signs of a problem, spraying only if the problem is acute, and choosing the least toxic option for getting rid of the pests.

The Whole Earth also acts on issues that directly affect its product offerings. It was the first store in this area to carry local, organic grass-fed beef, and in 1994 and 1995 it ran a letter-writing campaign to the federal government in favor of products being labeled as hormone free. The store also requires its dairy providers to sign affidavits that they do not knowingly purchase or use milk from cows that have been injected with bovine growth hormone and drops them if they refuse. And of course the Whole Earth only carries organic grass-fed beef.

Before the United States Department of Agriculture came out with its first organic food guidelines in December, 2000, the Whole Earth and its customers were responsible for 2,000 out of a total of 300,000 letters asking the USDA to exclude from the standards products that had been irradiated, planted in sewage-sludge fertilizer, or grown from genetically modified seed. When election time comes around, the Whole Earth always puts out candidates' voting records on environmental issues.

Tracking An Organic Movement

October 12, 1970: Founded with four barrels of bulk items and peanut butter at 183 Nassau Street.

Early 1970s: Engaged in recycling efforts on multiple fronts.

1971: Moved to 360 Nassau Street.

1972: Convinced borough to collect recyclables with their trucks; dwindled for lack of infrastructure.

1974: Opened the restaurant.

1980: Renovated the perimeter and back of what has been the main section of the store.

1984 on: Started providing yearly funding for Princeton Public Library book collection on environmental issues including biodiversity, global warming, ecology, rainforest preservation, environmental careers, renewable energy, and recycling.

1990: Canal clean up — collecting about 120 bags of garbage, roofing materials, a toilet, and a road sign — followed by Earth Day birthday party at Turning Basin Park.

Early 1990s: Took over the Holistic Health Association space.

1993: Ran a pesticide-free lawn campaign where homeowners pledged to use no pesticides and worked with New Jersey Environmental Federation to educate residents about composting, recycling, and chemical-free lawn care and to lobby borough and township to adopt pesticide policy on public lands and buildings.

April 1994: Resolution for borough to use integrated pest management drafted at suggestion of Whole Earth Center and New Jersey Environmental Foundation in conjunction with Princeton Regional Health approved by Princeton Borough, following lead of Princeton Township and Princeton Regional Schools.

1994 and 1995: Anti-bovine growth hormone campaign.

Spring 1998: Worked with local businesses on Save Organic Standards Campaign.

Fall 1998: Competition came to town in form of Wild Oats.

2000: Honored at NOFA-NJ's winter conference for promoting local organic farm products and acting as mentors to farmers; ran successful letter-writing campaign during comment period for first federal organic guidelines, protesting use of irradiation, fertilizers from sewage sludge, and genetically modified seed, all of which were taken out of guidelines.

2004: Started carrying local organic grass-fed meat.

Early 2007: Wild Oats leaves; started native plant workshops with Steven Hiltner with Friends of Princeton Open Space, on the last Sunday of the month.

April 2008. Opens $1 million addition.

The Whole Earth is still making connections with other environmental groups around town based on issues of mutual interest. It is, for example, currently hosting monthly native-plant workshops with Steven Hiltner of Friends of Princeton Open Space.

The store takes money out of its operating funds whenever possible and makes donations to mostly local, but also national, environmental organizations. It has donated countless thousands to Princeton Public Library for purchase of books related to the environment.

Although the store was started by volunteers, the staff, which now numbers 47 full and part time, was always paid. Waterman, who ran the first cafe, says that people on the staff often come back after they have left to do other things, and there have been many marriages and engagements between staff members. In fact, Fran McManus and Herb Mertz met through the Whole Earth, and they married in 1991.

The Whole Earth has always prided itself on breaking new ground, but as its issues have become part of a wider public consciousness, the store is always looking toward the next challenge the community will face. "The things we used to talk about are now things everyone is talking about," says McManus. "For many years, this store was the alternative for things in the marketplace — now you can buy organic corn chips at the Rite Aid drugstore."

But not everyone is turned on to the advantages of living in synch with the environment, and the store has a role to play here. "Now our challenge is to help people integrate these things in their lives," says McManus.

Improving the environment is an ongoing process, but at every step it's important to take a stand. Once the addition opens and everything gets settled, products that are even more environmentally friendly will come out. By committing to the costly process of making its new space entirely green, the Whole Earth is giving companies in the new industry of green building a leg up. "We help create the stepping stone," says McManus. "Whenever you use the stuff that's available, you help the marketplace take the next step."

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