

July 26, 2017

'Godfather of Solar East' at home in Cranston

Posted Wednesday, July 26, 2017 11:57 am

Seeing Gene Plunkett speak at a Solarize Cranston event in late June was no surprise. An electrician for 35 years, Plunkett speaks with zeal about his trade and he's been a proponent of solar power for decades.

In fact, it was a solar seminar that piqued his interest, similar to the one at which spoke a month ago. Bob Chew, a prominent champion of solar power, gave the lecture at the Lincoln campus in CCRRI in the late 1990s. Plunkett was enthralled by the concept, and spoke with Chew after the event. When Chew found out he was an electrician, he wanted to go out to lunch to discuss an idea for a company. Chew's mother, only by a twist of Rhode Island fate, was a customer of Plunkett's when he was a manager at Citizens Bank.

Plunkett, otherwise known as the "Godfather of Solar East," got to work with his new partner soon after that. They met up and scratched out some ideas on a napkin for the business that would eventually become Solar Wrights. Plunkett had his master electrician's license, and Chew was a solar pipe fitter and carpenter.

It was a match made in heaven.

"We were perfect for each other," Plunkett said of the business venture. "We worked under a hairdresser on Maple Avenue in Barrington. That's how we started. We did about 60 systems in Rhode Island."

What would the Godfather of Solar East be without his own solar system?

Plunkett has had his since 2006, 30 panels that stretch across the roof of his Cranston home. The roof is at such an angle that one has to be back about 60 feet to even see the panels. The panels can theoretically produce up to 6,000 watts, but the inverter's limit is 5,100. He said the highest reading he's ever seen is 5,400 watts.

On Thursday morning during his interview with the Herald, though, the sun had yet to peek out. He said that despite the lack of light, it's always chugging away.

"It's making power right now," Plunkett said. "It's making something. The best conditions for solar is cool, dry, blue sky."

The system, which takes in the direct current, is wired down the side of his home into the basement where it is turned into alternating current.

Plunkett explained the best way to evaluate the work of his solar panels is a pair of meters that measure kilowatt hours. His best description of that measurement unit was leaving a 1,000-watt hairdryer on for one hour equals one kilowatt hour.

He cheerily made his way to the side of his home where the amount of electricity he's used since 2006 is displayed on the meter: 50,505 kilowatt hours.

He then excitedly flipped on the light in his basement to show how much he has generated in 11 years, almost to the day, of using his panels. He tapped on the glass of his basement meter to proudly tout its number: just below 80,000 kilowatt hours.

He said that he usually pays nothing to National Grid for seven of his monthly bills throughout the year.

Plunkett proudly showed his May-to-June bill from National Grid, which showed the company owing him just more than \$2.

Conserving energy has been one of his passions throughout life, ever since he worked for 10 years as an auditor visiting homes to see how owners could cut down on their electric bill.

He's paid it forward with his solar expertise, too. Since the inception of his company around 1998, Plunkett has permitted 1,500 systems across Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

After his business grew and was bought by Alteris Renewables, solar remained the foundation of the company but turbines were added to their output. Chances are readers have driven by some of Plunkett's work, such as the turbines at New England Tech just off I-95.

Alteris would later join up with Real Goods Solar out of California. John Schaeffer, the company's founder and president, was described by Plunkett as the "Godfather of Solar West."

His Eastern counterpart is now serving as a solar ambassador as the Solarize R.I. initiative has broken into Cranston. The Solarize program, which is partnered with the Office of Energy Resources, Rhode Island Commerce and SmartPower, chose Cranston and Charlestown as this summer's municipalities. Signups are through September and anyone interested can visit www.solarizeri.com. Plunkett's daughter, Karen Stewart, serves as community outreach manager for SmartPower and has a system of her own.

Stewart said Monday night that the program has had 50 sign-ups and three contracts thus far.

However, Plunkett did have some advice for prospective solar homeowners. He said first and foremost the installer has to be a master electrician and to have one's service upgraded so that it can handle the system.

Also, his personal preference is to only install panels on roofs that are less than 5 years old.

"Luckily I had the roof done about three years before I had the solar done so I didn't have to worry about it," Plunkett said. "And basically once you put the solar on the roof, forget about wear on the roof. The panels take the heat in the summer so they don't crunch and crackle because they're being covered by the solar panels."

Always be wary of squirrels, though. Plunkett said they were the culprits during his only hiccup with the system.

"[It was] on a day when I should've been making 4[,000 or] 5,000 watts, I thought something's wrong," Plunkett said. "I got up there and sure enough it's chewed. He chewed through one of my strings."



MASTER AT WORK: Gene Plunkett, a master electrician by trade, shows off his basement meter, which measures the amount of power he's produced with his solar panels.



EXPLAINING HOW IT WORKS: Plunkett gestures to the roof, where his 30 solar panels are located, as he explains how the system is wired down the side of his house and into the basement.

(HERALD PHOTOS BY JACOB MARROCCO)

<http://cranstononline.com/stories/godfather-of-solar-east-at-home-in-cranston,126417>