

Green Giants

Elizabeth Wiatt and Laurie David, trustees of the Natural Resources Defense Council, have taken on a big task: saving our planet. | PETER DAVIS

Sitting in the Santa Monica headquarters of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Laurie David and Elizabeth Wiatt are taking a quick break from making a plethora of phone calls, writing endless letters, and firing off e-mails. David, who is married to Larry David, the cocreator of *Seinfeld* and the star of HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, is recalling the moment she decided to become an environmental activist. It was four years ago, after an enlightening breakfast with eco-crusader Bobby Kennedy Jr., that David was transformed. "I was determined to devote the rest of my life to working for this organization," she declares, proudly. Shortly after, David met Elizabeth Wiatt, a fellow New York transplant with like-minded concerns about the future of our planet.

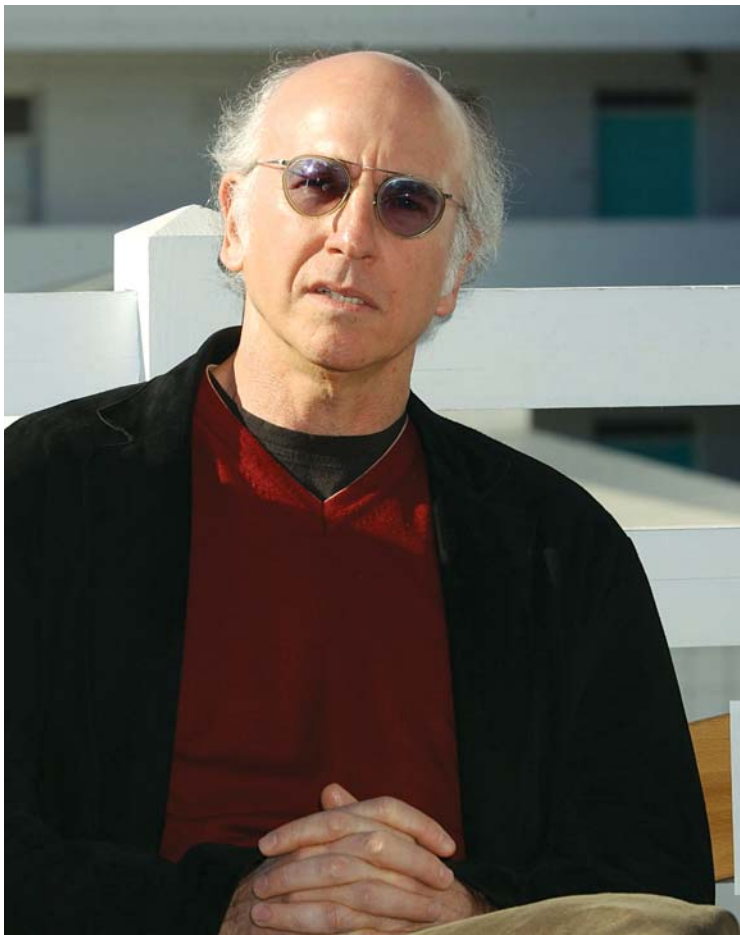
David and Wiatt, trustees of the NRDC, are on a mission. The pair wants to change the future of planet Earth, which they warn is at a crisis point. "Our work has never been more critical," Wiatt stresses, her eyes widening with worry. "We all have to put our foot down. There's so much the average person can do. Call your senator. E-mail and fax the White House." David nods in agreement. "That's one of the most surprising things about being an activist—you realize how powerful the letter and the phone call is. Enough individuals expressing their concerns can really shift things," adds David. "We want to hold people in office accountable. When they vote the wrong way, they need to hear from us."

Some of the most pressing issues the NRDC is addressing are global warming, the pollution of oceans and beaches, and promoting fuel efficiency and atmosphere-friendly hybrid cars. Protecting the earth's air, water, and land is what the NRDC's members care about passionately. "We have the greatest job description in the world," boasts Wiatt. "Ours is the mission of the NRDC: To safeguard the earth, its people, its plants and animals, and the natural systems upon which all life depends."

ECO-FRIENDS: Elizabeth Wiatt and Laurie David of the Natural Resources Defense Council.



photograph by Lee Celano/WireImage.com



Larry David and Leonardo DiCaprio are NRDC supporters.

To achieve their goals, David and Wiatt founded the NRDC Action Forum in 2001, to train a small group of members to be political activists while educating them about how environmental laws are passed and, too often, weakened. The pair also hosts informative eco-salons with guest speakers like NRDC public health expert Linda Greer, and recently opened an environmental action center in the Santa Monica headquarters, made possible with generous contributions from many supporters, including trustee Leonardo DiCaprio. “We’re really serious about what we’re doing,” David points out. “Many of us have ties to the entertainment world, but everyone in this group is serious.”

The NRDC has been victorious in many of its missions. It was involved in an historic purchase of the largest parcel of vacant land in Downtown Los Angeles, part of which will be turned into a park. It helped pass legislation to curb fuel emissions. And David has raised the profile of hybrid cars by placing them in shows like *24*, *Alias*, *Miss Match*, and *The District*. Recently, Wiatt has grown concerned with mercury, of which shockingly large levels are being detected in sea life such as tuna. “It’s unsafe to eat tuna and many other fish,” Wiatt warns. “The current administration’s response to the

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problem is to tell people just don’t eat it. Yet every kitchen cabinet in America has cans of tuna in it. Coal plants are a big source of mercury and are causing the problem. People are poisoning their children.” Wiatt is spearheading a public awareness campaign, with celebrity spokespeople, on the dangers of this heavy metal.

Poking around the NRDC offices, which resemble a Nantucket beach house, it’s evident that the organization practices what it preaches. Identified as the “greenest” building in the United States, every nook and cranny in the structure is eco-friendly. The carpet is made

from recycled blue jeans, the lighting system brightens and dims with the amount of sunshine that comes in through the many skylights and windows, and even the toilets use reclaimed water.

It only costs \$10 to join the organization, but there are many ways to volunteer time and contribute to the cause. On May 6, the organization will host a star-studded benefit at the Wadsworth Theater in Brentwood. “The Greatest Show on the Earth” will feature Tom Hanks as the “Ringmaster,” and such guests as Larry David, Conan O’Brien, Jack Black, Ali G., and DiCaprio, who will mostly likely pull up in his hybrid car. Willie Nelson is the musical act and Bobby Kennedy Jr. is the keynote speaker. Last year’s event raised \$1.6 million; this year David and Wiatt hope to raise \$2 million. “It will be the biggest environmental fund-raiser ever,” Wiatt says confidently. “It won’t feel like a slick premiere. It’s not a dinner either. It’s a show. Of course, there’s a great party afterwards. You’re going to be entertained, but you’re also going to get the message. Hopefully, everyone who comes is going to want to become involved in protecting our environment.”

Visit nrdc.org for more information about the Natural Resources Defense Council.