

The Naturals

A forceful group of A-list eco-activists is doing its best to turn Tinseltown green.

PHOTOS BY TIERNEY GEARON

It's the morning after the Academy Awards, and in offices across America, people are gathering to discuss the problems with Liv Tyler's hair and Charlize Theron's bronzer. But in an ecofriendly conference room at the Santa Monica offices of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), where the chairs are fashioned out of recycled seat belts, there are weightier matters on the agenda. A group of prominent Hollywood women—some rather bleary-eyed, having stayed up late with Tyler and Theron at *Vanity Fair*'s post-Oscar party—are discussing how to prevent the earth from turning into a giant ball of fire.

"Two weeks ago, the Pentagon issued a report saying that climate change can be more deadly than anyone expects," says Laurie David, wife of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*'s Larry David. "This from a government agency!" After a dramatic presentation on the dangers of global warming (complete with gasp-inducing photos of the disappearing Arctic ice cap), Elizabeth Wiatt, who's married to William Morris Agency president and CEO Jim Wiatt, distributes an "alert" memo—a list of key swing voters in the upcoming Senate ballot on the Climate Stewardship Act. The group proceeds to divvy up the list, vowing to barrage the senators' offices with phone calls, faxes and e-mails over the next few days.

So it goes at the monthly meetings of the NRDC Action Forum, an environmental advocacy group founded by David and Wiatt four years ago. With eight members, each married to a major Hollywood player—Kelly Meyer's husband, Ron, runs Universal Pictures, and writer Gigi Levangie Grazer is the wife of producer Brian—the Action Forum is a new kind of task force in the often flaky world of L.A. environmentalism. Although industry leaders have always been happy to write big checks to help save the planet, they've generally preferred to leave the nitty-gritty activism to people like Woody Harrelson. But the Action Forum, like some Gucci-clad squadron of avenging

eco-angels, is intent upon putting its mouth where its money is—not just raising cash, but relentlessly working the system to make sure it's spent correctly.

"People in Hollywood are very generous with their money, but they don't necessarily hold politicians accountable," says David. "That's something you have to learn how to do."

Lately, the women have been getting a lot of practice at the task—during trips to Sacramento, where they've rallied state support for fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles, and during whirlwind tours of Washington, D.C., where they helped push senators to defeat the 2003 energy bill, a pork-laden measure that they saw as a wet kiss to big business. In Hollywood, meanwhile, the Action Forum has emerged as a leading cause célèbre; this year's "Earth to L.A." revue on May 6, organized by David and Wiatt, is expected to raise at least \$2 million. A kind of A-list talent show in which everyone performs for free, the event will feature Tom Hanks, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jack Black and others, plus a 5-minute monologue by reluctant activist Larry David. "Larry never does anything live, but of course I forced him to do it for my event," Laurie says.

Julia Louis-Dreyfus, a fellow environmentalist who has known the Davids since her *Seinfeld* days, says the Action Forum's willpower, wealth and connections—along with its affiliation with the nonprofit, New York-based NRDC, a savvy group of lawyers and scientists—are what make it unique. "There's never been a group quite like this one," says Louis-Dreyfus. "They start by imagining how they might accomplish something in their wildest fantasies, and then they can actually go and accomplish it."

The group's stature in Hollywood is evident during a lunch with Wiatt and David at the Polo Lounge, where the two are seated in a prime booth right next to mogul Brad Grey's. (Grey, who stops by to joke about last night's *Curb* episode, is an old associate of Larry David's; he has already put up a chunk of



Action Forum members, from left: Heather Thomas Brittenham, Sofie Howard, Laurie David, Elizabeth Wiatt, Kelly Meyer and Gwen McCaw

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Above: At the new NRDC headquarters in Santa Monica, the toilets use collected rainwater. Right: A chair made from recycled seat belts. Below: Leonardo DiCaprio with Laurie David.



cussing what color the gala invitation should be," she says. "These women are very serious and educated on the issues." Very quickly, they're also learning about some of the less savory aspects of politics. Last year, when they met with one congressman to ask him why he wasn't supporting a particular piece of legislation, he insisted he was unaware of it; as it turned out, his chief aide, presumably acting under pressure from big-business lobbyists, had kept the paperwork off his desk. The congressman offered to back the bill on the spot.

Back in Los Angeles, the Action Forum members have been training their powers of persuasion on the entertainment community, starting with their spouses. Laurie David famously pressured Larry to drive a Prius on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; now the cars are appearing on *Alias* and *24* (and in the driveways of Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio and Cameron Diaz). So far, few of the husbands themselves have turned into activists, but they've been coming through with financial support, along with frequent wisecracks. Larry David has joked about how he happily married a "materialistic, narcissistic, superficial, bosomy woman from Long Island" but now he's stuck with a rabid environmentalist. And Ron Meyer will sometimes say to Kelly, "I gave up aerosol deodorant for you 10 years ago—isn't that enough?" But the Action Forum's growing roster of high-profile backers speaks for itself. One of Skip Brittenham's clients is Tom Ford, who happened to contribute a major sum to Earth to L.A. And it probably didn't hurt that Ron Meyer's daughter, Jennifer, works for Ralph Lauren, whose fragrance division is the event's official sponsor.

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cash for the Earth to L.A. benefit.) Indeed, neither Wiatt nor David fits the typical tree-hugger profile; some have described them as the Mary and Rhoda of environmental activism. Wiatt, a chic and soft-spoken former *Vogue* staffer, admits to getting misty-eyed at Sea World recently while taking her children to see Shamu the killer whale. David, an appealingly brassy, brunette version of her mild-mannered TV counterpart (played by Cheryl Hines), has been known to yell out the window of her hybrid Toyota Prius at anyone who has the nerve to whiz past her in a gas-guzzling SUV.

The mere mention of the Bush administration is all it takes to get both women riffing on how the White House is reversing decades of progress on environmental protection. "It's really frightening what Bush is doing," David says. "Pick a topic: clean air, clean water, forest issues, coal mining issues, power plant issues, mercury issues, public health. It's completely across the board." Many of the Forum members are also active in political fundraising, and their connections, along with those of the nonpartisan NRDC, have opened many doors in Sacramento and on Capitol Hill. Nevertheless, during their trip to the Capitol last year, the women resorted to guerrilla tactics at times, accosting certain senators who'd denied them a meeting. "We caused a whole commotion," says Wiatt. "After one day, people knew we were in town."

Assertiveness comes naturally to these women, most of whom had high-powered careers of their own before stopping to raise children. (Wiatt was an ICM agent after her stint at *Vogue*; David was a talent coordinator for David Letterman.) And in their meetings with lawmakers, it doesn't hurt that they're a lot more glamorous than your typical Sierra Club supplicants. One standout is Heather Thomas Brittenham, a writer and actress (*The Fall Guy*) now married to hotshot lawyer Skip Brittenham. "I'm sort of the Mae West of the group," jokes Brittenham, who arrives at a lunchtime interview (directly from a Roling session) in a tight cashmere sweater and even tighter jeans. "I believe in seducing, not browbeating," she says. "I'll always leave the senator's office going, 'Hey, he was kind of hot!'"

Still, Sofie Howard, an art director married to composer James Newton Howard, says her fellow members are anything but flighty. "It's completely the opposite of so many L.A. charity boards, where you sit around for an hour dis-

Of course, anyone looking to take potshots at Hollywood's limousine liberals will find easy targets in the Action Forum members. Most live in enormous, energy-sucking homes in Santa Monica or the Pacific Palisades and have boarded their share of Gulfstream Vs. But, for one thing, you'll never catch one of them in a limousine (yes, you guessed it—low fuel efficiency). And even in their grand houses, they've all begun banning pesticides and counting kilowatts, some obsessively so. In Wyoming, Brittenham is building a "green" home, complete with solar heating and a plumbing system that uses reclaimed water; Meyer, a longtime surfer and the group's main advocate for ocean issues, spent a recent afternoon walking along a Malibu beach with a garbage bag, picking up trash.

"If we don't focus on these issues, then who will?" Wiatt says. "When you have a privileged life, when you're not focused on paying your utility bills, then that's exactly when you should be doing all this." Half-jokingly, Gigi Grazer claims she wishes she could return to her pre-NRDC state of blissful ignorance. "Unfortunately, now I'm screwed," she says. "Whenever someone says, 'It's a beautiful day!' I always think of global warming—how the world is doomed if something isn't done right away."

The same goes for Brittenham, who can spend 20 minutes expounding on the plight of the endangered elk near her second home in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where she recently organized a grassroots "truth-telling" session at one of Dick Cheney's favorite restaurants (which she co-owns). And don't get her started on the subject of fuel efficiency: "I'm convinced that everyone with a Hummer has a small dick," she says.

Hmm. The Action Forum members are well aware that Arnold Schwarzenegger, their governor, is the world's chief poster boy for Hummer ownership. In fact, on a recent trip to Sacramento, Laurie David managed to get a face-to-face meeting with Schwarzenegger to make a plea for allowing hybrid cars onto California's restricted commuter lanes. Uncharacteristically, she declined to mention his own automobiles (or his private parts). But it seems the governor hasn't heard the last on the subject.

"Getting that man in a hybrid car would be one of our greatest victories," David says. "I am not giving up on that hope." —CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY