



Mothers follow a natural path

Parents adopt green practices, use organic products in raising their families

By Susan Gvozdas
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Cassandra Alls' friends thought she was crazy when she said her baby would be wrapped in cloth diapers and be eating homemade baby food. Some thought she would quit after a few weeks of sleep deprivation.

Not so. A year later, Alls still makes all of baby Josephine's food and tries to keep processed foods out of her family's Annapolis home. She maintains an organic herb and vegetable garden in the backyard. As for cloth diapers, she relies on a vendor, which has made her commitment easier to keep than in previous days, she said.

Alls has also purged her home of what she calls toxic cleaning solutions and uses naturally-made personal care products. The whole family - even the dog, Bailey - sees a homeopathic doctor, who espouses herbal remedies. Bailey also eats only organic food.

More recently, Alls started the first Maryland chapter of the nonprofit Holistic Moms Network, meeting and uniting a group of like-minded mothers - and at least two fathers - who share tips and ideas on clean and green living.

More than a dozen people came to the first two meetings this spring, and Alls said she has 40 people on her contact list. "I know it's going to grow and grow," Alls said. The organization started in New Jersey five years ago and now boasts 130 chapters nationwide. Alls learned about the Holistic Moms Network when she read about it in *Mothering* magazine. At the time, she lived with her husband, Bryan, in Florida and was a merchandise manager for Nordstrom.

"We were looking at starting on a more natural path," Alls said. When the retailer transferred her to Tysons Corner, Va., she decided to move to Annapolis. It was during her pregnancy that Alls became more committed to holistic living. She began researching information and set up a Web site in April 2007 to share what she had learned: sunshineorganics.net. She discovered the Holistic Moms Network in December and started working on setting up a local chapter. Alls sent out news releases and mailers to moms' groups and wellness centers. She held an open house May 12.

Alls said the beauty of her group is that members don't have to subscribe to every facet of holistic living, which can include rejecting immunizations for children. Josephine was taken to a pediatrician when she was born, before she was switched to a homeopathic doctor, Alls said. At Monday's meeting, Alls asked mothers to introduce themselves, list some of their interests and then confess to one guilty, nonholistic pleasure.

Most confessed to TV reality show watching. One mother mentioned smoking and drinking. One complained that her cloth diapers leaked, and she was having second thoughts. Pat Edwards, one of the few fathers to come, acknowledged loving his sport utility vehicle. "I have a Land Cruiser, so I have a big carbon footprint following me," he said. One of the new members is Kenya Smith, 32, who drove up from her home in Huntingtown, Calvert County. She came across the national Holistic Moms Network by accident last year when she was searching "holistic" on the Internet.

She said she kept checking back to see if a local chapter would develop. When she saw an advertisement for the Annapolis' chapter's first group, she was "pretty excited."

Smith became interested in less toxic living when she started getting sick after using bleach and being exposed to regular household cleaners in the early 1990s. Air fresheners were enough to make her eyes water. She became a vegetarian when she noticed she was getting sick after eating meat. Now that milk has started to bother her, she might become a vegan. "I feel so much better," Smith said of eliminating meat. Both of her children are vegetarians, too. Smith uses only Seventh Generation cleaning products, a company that claims not to use harsh chemicals. Like Alls, she also makes some of her own cleaning solutions. Gradually, she has become interested in other holistic topics and wants to learn as much as she can about healthy foods and helping the environment. The network provides a ready group of like-minded people, a welcome change from the years of needling from friends. Future meetings will feature topics such as eating nutrient-dense foods, breast feeding and homeopathic medicine.

Megan Lanier, 31, of Glen Burnie, said she has been environmentally aware her whole life, but became more so when she was pregnant. She said it was a relief to learn about the Holistic Moms Network in *Mothering*, then about the formation of the local chapter. She noted that more companies are jumping on the bandwagon, including Clorox, which launched a line of biodegradable cleaners this year. More mainstream grocery stores carry organic fruits and vegetables, she said. Lanier was delighted to find a homemade recipe for floor cleaner. She uses a mixture of water, vinegar and dishwashing liquid.

Lanier said her friends and family thought she was nuts when she turned to cloth diapers and homemade baby food. Though she struggles to get to meetings, she has been corresponding with members through e-mail. She is thrilled to know that she's not alone. "I think there is an ever-growing underground movement of mothers doing this," Lanier said.

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