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Cover photo by Sam Diephuis



Best Version Media

Isabelle Duvivier shows the rainwater collection system she helped build at St. Mark School

ISABELLE DUVIVIER AND JOHN TIPTON POWER UP FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Building and Winning in Venice

BY BETTY BAILEY

PHOTOGRAPHY • SAM DIEPHUIS

John Tipton and Isabelle Duvivier with son Finn, Cookie the airedale, and L.B. ("Little Beast") the standard poodle

Combine an environmentally minded architect and an Emmy Award-winning storyteller — and you have a Venice power couple with the tools to make an impact. Meet Isabelle Duvivier and John Tipton, leaders by example, who share information and create awareness to enhance the quality of life in their community.

Their house was built in 1912; but by using recycled and repurposed material along with strategically placed windows, solar tubes and high-efficiency appliances, Duvivier has transformed it into a shining example of how even a 100-year-old house can be energy efficient. It won the 2012 Outstanding Home Award by the United States Green Building Council. It also earned a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) platinum certification, a globally recognized symbol of sustainability achievement. The house had the 7th-highest ranking in California and was in the top 25 nationally. “At the time, it was the highest-ranking LEED house in Venice,” says Duvivier.

Currently, she and Tipton are in the process of creating a second unit on their property as part of the Living Building Challenge. According to this initiative of the International Living Future Institute, the unit “can use no additional energy and no added water. It also has to be beautiful, include no carcinogens, and recycle all waste,” Duvivier explains. “It’s a very rigorous system — even more rigorous than LEED.”

“It’s a model for how the average person can create a sustainable home that doesn’t cost you twenty million dollars,” Tipton adds. “With trees, solar, gray water recovery and electric cars, we’re trying to set an example of what you can do locally.”

The couple has strong ties to the Venice community, which has been their home since 2001. “We live a very neighborhood-oriented life,” says Tipton. “Isabelle walks to work — her office has been on the same block for 17 years. Our son Finn (age 14) goes to school in the neighborhood. He’s been riding his bike to and from school since the third grade.”

As a cinematographer specializing in sports documentaries, Tipton says his own commute, which is frequently international, is hassle free. “Venice is my hub and it’s great because it’s right by LAX, so when I land, I can get home quickly.”

Tipton says “quality of life” is the biggest advantage of living in Venice. Everything they need is close by, eliminating the need to spend hours in traffic. “We’ve made a life where we don’t have to contend with that nonsense,” he says. “Finn is able to be more independent because he can get himself to and from school. We have plenty of friends who have to drive their kids to school. They’re not allowed to go anywhere by themselves — they’re not allowed to be unattended. Finn cooked dinner tonight; and I think his independence was brought on by the way we’ve structured life here.”

Duvivier, winner of two L.A. County 2014 Green Leadership Awards, grew up in Santa Monica. She attended Samohi before heading to college at U.C. Berkeley, where her interest in nature and architecture bloomed. “I was in a house for the first time in my life and I started digging a garden,” she says. “I wanted to design buildings. I wanted to eventually build a house for myself, and one for my mom and my sister. We had never had a real home because we always lived in apartments.”

Tipton, who has received eight Emmy Awards, is from Chicago but moved to New York City to study at Parsons School of Design.

The couple met when Duvivier was attending a conference in New York on green map design. “He’s an athlete, he’s into science,” says Duvivier. “He’s into things that are beautiful. I knew I was in love with him when, 20 years ago, we went to the grocery store and he told the cashier he didn’t need a bag.”

“She introduced me to Venice,” Tipton adds. “Basically, I was introduced to the coolest part of L.A.”

“Why doesn’t every building in this city have solar panels on it? It must be because people don’t understand. They’re not educated about it.”

Duvivier’s passion for the environment has carried through to local Venice schools, starting with Coeur D’Alene Avenue Elementary. When Finn was a student there, she saw some young students digging into the asphalt, trying to reach the dirt. “They were trying to find bugs,” she says. “A school is a place where the kids are supposed to learn values that they take with them through the rest of their lives but, basically, they were in buildings on a sea of blacktop. It was kind of a depressing, all-asphalt campus; and I wanted to make it more green and sustainable. Plus, I saw all that water being wasted. I could see it running down the gutter of my street.”

Duvivier approached the school’s principal and, with help from the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission and a grant from TOMS (the Playa Del Rey-based purveyor of shoes and apparel), they planted 50 trees on the campus and removed thousands of square feet of asphalt to make room for rain gardens to keep rain runoff from flowing into the ocean. “In a three-day period, we removed all the asphalt and put in a whole bunch of plants,” she says. “We planted veggie gardens and themed gardens, such as ‘dinosaur gardens.’ It was fun!”

In middle school at Saint Mark, Finn launched his own environmental cause. The school already had a policy of no-waste lunches; students were required to bring lunch boxes instead of paper bags. As a member of the student council, Finn led a movement that rid the lunch area of trashcans. “He saw the discrepancy,” says Duvivier. “He even dressed up as Oscar the Grouch and explained to



Finn with his ukulele



Isabelle Duvivier by her waterwheel

students what it means to have a no-waste lunch. He told them how to shop and how to help their parents pack a lunch for them.” (See related story on page 16.)

Keeping an open conversation about environmental issues, and how homes can be comfortable as well as environmentally friendly, is something Duvivier and Tipton strive for. “It’s always been our focus to create amazing habitable spaces that also are not poisonous to the inhabitants and are cost-effective, with easy-to-use methods of conserving resources,” says Tipton. “Why doesn’t every building in this city have solar panels on it? I don’t understand it. It must be because people don’t understand. They’re not educated about it.”

Duvivier was recently appointed to the Community Forest Advisory Committee, which oversees tree-planting policies for the Venice district “That last fire we saw really showed how our climate is moving forward. We’re going to be heating up and having a lot more dirty air,”

she says. “Planting trees is a very effective way to lower temperatures and cool our cities — and they cost next to nothing. You plant them and they grow. The hotter it gets the better they grow. Trees do benefit from carbon dioxide.”

She is also doing research on plant material that serves the needs of different species into building designs in hopes of creating healthy habitats for local animal species. “California is losing species diversity faster than any state in the nation other than Hawaii,” says Duvivier. “The primary reason is development.”

By living their daily lives in their community, Duvivier and Tipton hope others will be inspired to learn more about creating healthier, more environmentally friendly homes. “We want to make people more connected, and to do that by example,” she says. “People are inspired by beautiful things in nature. If you can attract butterflies and use them as the sweetening, you can attract other critters — including humans.”

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