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Nonprofit to provide healthy snacks for kids

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URBANA – The name is a bit inscrutable and the goals are global, but the first project of a new environmental group called 4 Osprey involves real food for real kids.

The nonprofit organization, formed recently by Champaign native Rebecca McBride to promote sustainable lifestyles, will provide organic snacks this fall for the Eastern Illinois Foodbank's BackPack Program, which sends food home with low-income schoolchildren every weekend.

It's part of 4 Osprey's first campaign, dubbed "Ecofluent" by McBride, the group's president and senior associate director of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts.

McBride coined the term "ecofluent" to describe people who are committed to social and environmental causes and use their buying power, social interactions and donations to help create an environmentally sustainable world.

Organic foods are more expensive, and that often makes them unaffordable for lower-income families, McBride said. The ecofluent community can help bridge the "green divide" through donations for those products and other efforts, and in the process support a green marketplace, she said.

Ecofluent's first project, Healthy Futures, is a partnership with the food bank, Common Ground Food Co-op in Urbana, and two organic food suppliers, Clif Bar & Co. and United Natural Food. McBride has already ordered 6,000 snacks from Clif Bar, one for every backpack for the entire fall semester.

The snack in question: fruit leather. It's a twist, literally, on the fruit roll-ups that aren't so healthy for kids, made instead with real fruit.

Food bank marketing director Cheryl Precious said the agency was thrilled to receive a snack that provides a full day's serving of fruit. The food bank tries to provide nutritious foods in the backpacks, but fresh fruit is too perishable, she said.

Precious said the Healthy Futures initiative will not only provide healthy food for kids now but also improves the health of the planet long-term.

"First, we're strengthening the marketplace for the creation of sustainable food. We're rewarding those companies that are creating food and producing food in more sustainable

ways," McBride said.

And if demand goes up, supplies will increase, prices will come down, and more families will be able to afford them, McBride said.

The goal is to support the Backpack Program through the second semester and beyond, McBride said. Eventually she'd like to see all the food distributed through the backpacks be healthy and organic.

McBride funded the initial \$2,700 purchase herself and hopes others will follow suit. She's a former board member at the food bank, so it was a perfect blend of her interests.

"It's just something I've wanted to do for a long time. I wanted to give back. I've been blessed in so many ways," she said.

Other Ecofluent campaign board members are Anni Poppen, a graphic designer with an environmental science background, who also works at Krannert; and Betsy Bachmann, a landscaper who specializes in native species and organic designs.

The mission of 4 Osprey is broader, to "encourage people to live in harmony and in balance with our Earth," McBride said. "We can live well, live full lives, still have products that we love and we can live in balance with our natural world."

The name came to McBride during a visit to Florida in 2006, after she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, as she pondered what she wanted to do with her passion for environmental work. She was considering creating a nonprofit when four ospreys suddenly appeared, circling over her head, and "it was kind of a kind of a signal: 'That's it, do that,'" she said. "It was this very moving moment of my life."

McBride, who is now cancer-free, incorporated the group in August 2009 and launched Ecofluent earlier this month. The next major project will be "Climb to the Roof of Africa," scheduled for summer 2011, when a team of individuals plans to climb Mount Kilimanjaro to build awareness and raise funds for the organization.

The Ecofluent website, <http://www.ecofluent.org> [3], includes information on a wide variety of sustainable products, from food to couches, so buyers can use it as a "one-stop shop," she said. It also lists opportunities to donate and spread the word through social networking.

"People realize if we act in certain ways and we purchase certain things, we can really shape the world in which we live," McBride said.

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