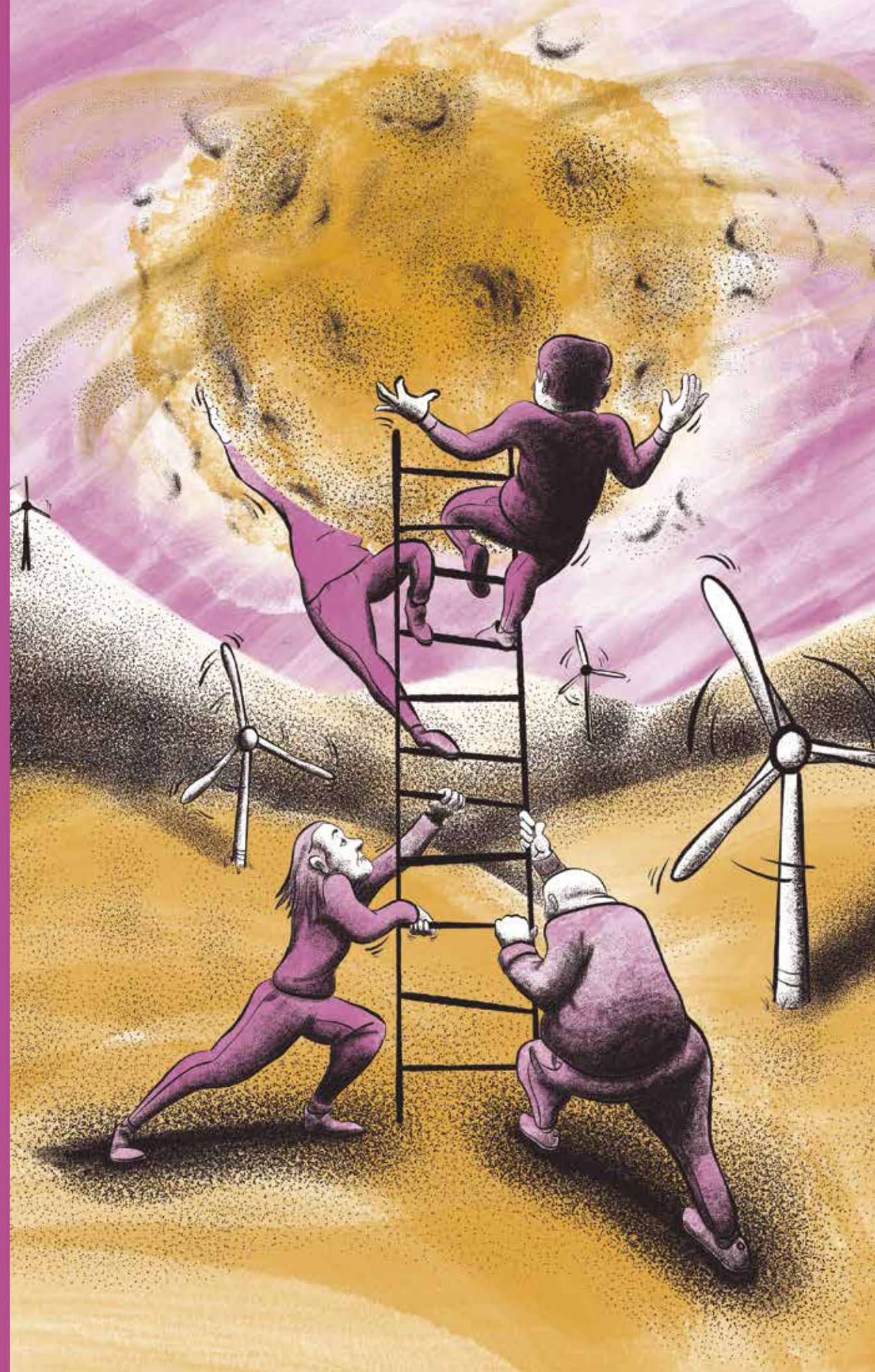


YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 2000

GEOGRAPHY
Minnesota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$500,000 – \$999,999

LEADER
John Vaughn



INNOVATION STORY

No 4

RURAL RENEWABLE
ENERGY ALLIANCE

POWERING UP COMMUNITY

STORY BY
Melissa Wray



BACKUS

MINNESOTA

Rural Renewable Energy Alliance fights energy poverty with a focus on expanding solar energy — using strong partnerships and a culture of ideas to build a solar workforce in rural Minnesota and help make the benefits of solar energy accessible to all.

Rural Renewable Energy Alliance

RREAL influences the energy ecosystem by sharing strategies for bridging the renewable energy access divide between urban areas and less affluent rural communities.

BREAK THROUGH

RREAL addresses the pervasive problem of energy poverty using existing energy assistance programs to bring solar energy options to more communities — increasing the number of households served by energy assistance, educating a solar workforce and implementing equitable renewable energy solutions to benefit the climate.



A SPACE FOR IDEAS

RREAL promotes a healthy culture of exchange, welcoming ideas and input from staff and community alike, as part of a people-centric approach that guides all of its work.



THE LOCAL ANGLE

As one of the only solar energy organizations operating in rural Minnesota, RREAL has learned to be proactive about creating approaches specific to its region and to ensure its deep partnerships are as impactful as possible.



COMMUNICATION AS CATALYST

RREAL has had to work hard to help solar energy gain acceptance in the broader energy ecosystem — finding messages that work for specific audiences and pushing through difficult challenges to its work.



ESPECIALLY IN RURAL MINNESOTA,

it's really important to have people interested in solar

AND TRAIN THEM WHILE THEY'RE HERE.

Erica Bjelland
RREAL



Erica
Bjelland
had an
idea.

SOLAR IN NORTHERN MN

The young, relatively new employee at the Rural Renewable Energy Alliance (RREAL) wanted to plant pollinator-friendly plants underneath some of the nonprofit's solar arrays associated with its Solar Schools project.

When she approached Jason Eden, then executive director of RREAL, he told her to pursue it. As Erica tells this story, she breaks into a big grin and exclaims, "And I did! It took a whole year, but his trust in me doing that is something that's so valuable." She notes how empowering it felt to have that encouragement as a young woman with less experience than other staff.

**"I'M SO GRATEFUL FOR
RREAL giving me
that chance."**

Giving everyone a chance — with an extra shot of encouragement — seems to be in RREAL's DNA.

Erica's path to the Rural Renewable Energy Alliance is a familiar one to her colleagues, many of whom had some sort of interaction with a RREAL program before joining the staff.

Erica started at RREAL just out of college as an AmeriCorps VISTA member and became a full-time program development specialist. One could say she grew up within the organization — an experience many others echo.

RREAL is located in the rural, relatively low-income city of Backus, Minnesota, a town of approximately 300 people in Cass County. Its mission is to "make solar energy accessible to communities of all income levels," a simple yet significant objective that differentiates RREAL from other solar organizations.

Energy poverty, as Erica puts it, is having to choose between paying energy bills and putting food on the table. It's a problem facing many Americans, yet one that doesn't get much mainstream media attention.

RREAL accomplishes its mission primarily through its Solar Assistance program, which provides solar energy to low-income families and communities, allowing recipients to save on energy costs and put that money toward other essential living costs.

“OUR STRATEGIC VISION IS TO USE SOLAR TO reduce poverty in Central and Northern Minnesota,”


says executive director John Vaughn. “Over time we intend to do so in sufficient numbers to have a provable effect on poverty.” The commitment to ending energy poverty is the nonprofit's passion, but the people power needed to turn this vision into a reality is where RREAL's true innovative heart lies.

Erica and fellow former program development specialist Rachel Juritsch both believe RREAL's emphasis on bringing young people into the organization — and, consequently, to rural Minnesota — is an important one. Young people like the two of them come in through RREAL's Education and Community Outreach program as volunteers with AmeriCorps VISTA and Minnesota GreenCorps. As Erica says,


“PART OF RREAL IS ABOUT fostering the next generation of solar installers,

and especially in rural Minnesota, it's really important to have people interested in solar and train them while they're here.”





A SPACE FOR IDEAS



WE WERE ABLE TO COME TOGETHER AND
**figure out which
part each person
played.**

Erica Bjelland
RREAL



Digging deeper into this people-centric approach reveals a healthy culture of exchange, both within the staff and in how the organization involves the community in decision-making.

Two out of nine seats on RREAL's board are reserved for clients of its energy assistance program. John says this structure stems from its ongoing close relationships with Community Action Agencies, which were required by federal mandate to have representatives from the communities they serve on their boards to ensure reflective strategic visioning. "It's good to have diverse viewpoints on your board so you can have productive conversations that aren't just in the same paradigm of people," he says.

The value of welcoming diverse viewpoints shows up at RREAL in other ways, too. Many employees have come to the organization as solar assistance recipients or through training programs RREAL has hosted locally. This personal experience fosters staff who are uniquely well equipped to contribute ideas, share experiences and further develop the nonprofit's vision.

Erica is quick to attribute much of this team environment to RREAL founders Jason and BJ Eden. When Jason left his position as executive director in 2019, things could have easily crumbled. Yet the established people-centric approach carried RREAL through these challenging times. "Jason and BJ left this feeling and this team that was already so close that we were able to come together and figure out which part each person played," Erica says.

Beyond staff meetings, which staff say are very open for discussion and questions, RREAL's leadership has a history of encouraging its employees at any level to pursue projects of their own initiative. Erica's pollinator project is one example of this. Another is a fundraiser she organized for RREAL, which she similarly came up with on her own and approached leadership for permission to pursue. Rachel credits Jason for continuing to encourage her despite many roadblocks and changes that came up in the planning process.

"THAT WAS JUST REALLY COOL, to be encouraged all the time," she says.



How can organizations use fresh ideas to remain flexible and responsive to changing circumstances in their communities?

In 2019, fresh ideas and flexibility would have been a conscious choice for many nonprofits based on a desire to evolve past the status quo. All that changed in March 2020. Therefore, anticipation, embracing new ventures and adaptability, especially with partnerships and collaborations, is what will keep our missions vibrant and our work focused on those we serve.

One of RREAL's new partnerships that is on the hunt for fresh ideas and flexibility is with the U of M's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, Regional Sustainable Development program and Clean Energy Resource Teams. We are working together on a geographic information system mapping and evaluation tool specifically designed to foster collaboration focused on reducing poverty with renewable energy.

John Vaughn
RREAL

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 1



THE LOCAL ANGLE



WE'VE HAD TO KIND OF CREATE
our own way.

Erica Bjelland

RREAL



RREAL is one of the only solar companies in rural Minnesota, and it looks very different from those operating in urban areas. Urban settings typically have larger companies offering more rebates, more training opportunities for people looking to work as solar installers and technicians and more jobs and opportunities to connect training to employment.



Because these opportunities are much scarcer outside cities, there simply isn't much of a trained solar workforce in rural Minnesota, and there aren't enough opportunities for those workers who do live here to find work near their communities.

RREAL has adapted to these challenges by turning to — and investing in — its community. “We’ve had to kind of create our own way,” Erica says.

Here, too, that people-centric approach has opened up new ideas and viewpoints, including getting more intentional about building a strong regional workforce. RREAL has created its own training programs for individuals within Backus and the surrounding rural communities, including their neighbors in both the White Earth Nation and Leech Lake Nation. One of RREAL’s installation supervisors started off in the Leech Lake Tribal College training program, eventually became an installation technician with RREAL and has stayed to grow into his current supervisory role with the organization.

“The surrounding community in rural places is pretty tightknit,” says Erica. “A lot of our partners are long-standing partners.”

WE HAVE THESE GREAT RELATIONSHIPS WE KEEP BUILDING ON AND have worked with for many years.”

The relationship with the White Earth Nation highlights RREAL’s imperative to build on and deepen its partnership-fueled projects — getting more impact from programs tailor-made for rural communities. As

John explains, the initial scope of the White Earth Nation partnership was for RREAL to build a solar array and offer internships and simple educational presentations to White Earth. But after taking a closer look at the opportunities for greater impact, it blossomed into something bigger. “The internships within the array program will turn into an accredited solar program at the tribal college,” says John. “We’re also in the beginning stages of launching a joint renewable energy business venture with the tribe. That would be an ongoing partnership that would span many, many years and would seek out projects that make sense for the partners.” This steadfast presence and commitment of both RREAL and its partners is a common theme.

RREAL’s focus on creating both training and employment opportunities in its own Cass County community is vital. And because it’s designed by and for people in the region, it’s unique: “It looks a bit different because we’re creating it,” says Erica.

“IT’S A LITTLE BIT SMALLER, but it works.”



What are key elements of **long-term relationship-building with community stakeholders and partners?**

The most important key element of long-term relationships is integrity. Walking the talk. Behavior equals rhetoric. Integrity is the cornerstone of trust; constancy and perseverance build and preserve trust. This involves a sustainable presence in communities and the orientation of mutual problem-solving with partners and communities. These behaviors keep the relationships close.

RREAL has become almost 100 percent partnership-based with tribes, rural habitats, the U of M and schools. We see all of these as long-term commitments because our vision is to use solar to reduce poverty in central and northern Minnesota, and this can only be done through partnerships with supportive communities.

**John Vaughn
RREAL**

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 2



COMMUNICATION AS CATALYST



RREAL brings this local-focused intentionality to all of its deep community partnerships, many of which have been in the making for years.

IN THE END,
**it's always about
the people.**

Erica Bjelland
RREAL

The Solar Schools project is a prime example. Through this program, RREAL works with area school districts to install solar arrays in an effort to reduce energy costs while also educating youth about solar technology through curriculum in science classrooms.

The Solar Schools project at Pine River-Backus School District took many years to organize — at least six, by the count of former superintendent Dave Endicott. The effort was tough to get off the ground; yes, city codes needed to be changed, but the biggest hurdle was engaging with the community. RREAL stuck with it, knowing the value it could bring to the districts and the community. “Some people weren’t that excited about solar energy,” says Rachel.

“BUT ONCE WE TALKED ABOUT THE DIFFERENT WAYS SOLAR CAN HELP, NOT JUST ENVIRONMENTALLY BUT ECONOMICALLY AND SOCIALLY, we saw that we can show them that solar fits!”

That willingness to dig in worked. Dave says it was “the tenacity of people working together and not giving up” that resulted in the completion of the solar array on school grounds.

The connection between RREAL and its partners — one that makes it easier to push through challenges — stems from a shared passion and common vision. It hasn’t always been an easy road, however.

When RREAL started in 2000, many people weren’t yet considering solar energy seriously. The organization faced challenges in bringing solar energy into the broader energy conversation.

For Solar Schools, RREAL worked with the Region Five Commission — a multicounty government-nonprofit partnership. Many of the elected officials connected to the project were hesitant to expand their thinking on energy beyond the fossil fuel-based status quo. The commission needed a lot of initial convincing to decide to back this \$2.5 million solar project, so the RREAL team worked to build its persuasive muscle. Ask anyone on RREAL’s staff how to explain the economic value of renewable energy to a business-minded individual, and they will passionately rattle off statistics and figures in addition to the environmental impact benefits — an approach that appealed to a fiscally conservative audience and helped secure the needed funding.



How can organizations ensure their **work and vision reflect and include the communities they serve?**

To accurately reflect the community, nonprofits must view the community itself and your community-based partners as the leaders. Your organization should have a mission and a strategic vision that are designed to meet those needs.

To do this, organizations need to adopt an orientation where you meet communities where they are at. If you can do that, then you can truly hear what they are saying and do the right thing for and with them.

That said, organizations must plan to be successful, so any strategic planning should start with and be based on what you are hearing from the communities you serve and your partners first.

John Vaughn
RREAL

CHARACTERISTIC NO. 3



RREAL'S HEADQUARTERS

“Going solar is a 10-year return on investment,” John says. “You go into a positive cash flow after that. From a pure business point of view, I don’t know why anyone is not doing it.”

Today, RREAL works with many different energy utilities and agencies, progress gained in part because of more welcoming local and national solar energy policy. Erica credits the tightknit Minnesota renewable and solar energy industry for driving the regional shift. “Enabling policy in Minnesota allowed the masses to rally behind solar, and equity in solar — something we stand for in our state,” Erica says. “Those regional policies opened the minds of even bigger government agencies.”

**RREAL'S APPROACH TO ITS PARTNERSHIPS
ECHOES ITS VALUE OF GENUINE CONNECTION.**

**“You meet them where
they are,”**

John says of how RREAL enters new projects with partners. “They’re the community-rooted organizations, so it’s pretty much in service to them. And, fortunately, we fit in well with what they want to do.”

As Erica describes it, “In the end it’s always about the people — about keeping those relationships and making sure people are heard.”