Students use solar power to energize classrooms

Project will generate enough energy to power a small home

CALGARY (CP) — A group of Alberta teens who have powered part of their school with solar energy is hoping the project will be a green light for others to follow.

Students at Cochrane High School are using solar panels and a wind turbine to create alternative energy for their classrooms.

"We're trying to do something no high school has done to this extent. It's a new era in the creation of energy within schools," says Grade 12 student Denyse Skipper.

Students and teachers raised more than $47,000 in a matter of months to cover the cost of 30 solar panels and a small turbine.

That tells 17-year-old Julian Chesterman there's a lot of public interest in sustainable technologies.

"I think a lot of people support the concept," says the Grade 12 student, who plans to study engineering at university.

"While they don't have the money to set up their own house using solar panels or some other form of sustainable development, they are quite prepared to make a donation to support an initiative to do so."

The project will generate about 3.3 kilowatts of electricity.

That's enough to power a small home, but it will only account for about one per cent of the high school's energy needs. Still, it's an important start.

"Setting an example is always one of the most important things in promoting the (adoption) of new technology," says Chesterman, adding that it's good the venture is taking place in oil-rich Alberta.

And he says it's time for the debt-free provincial government to push the envelope on promoting sustainable energy.

"We're not that progressive in some regards," says Chesterman. "We have the money to pursue these technologies. In another few years, with more investment in them, they will be on par cost-wise with more traditional means."

The project began as the brainchild of science teachers Stephanie Bennett and Earl Binder, who wanted the curriculum concepts of energy conservation to be more than just dry preaching about the threat of global warming and greenhouse gases.

Bennett was blown away by how the 15 students who adopted the plan took charge.

"These kids are doers," says Bennett, noting they didn't get course credit for the dozens of hours they invested on their own time.

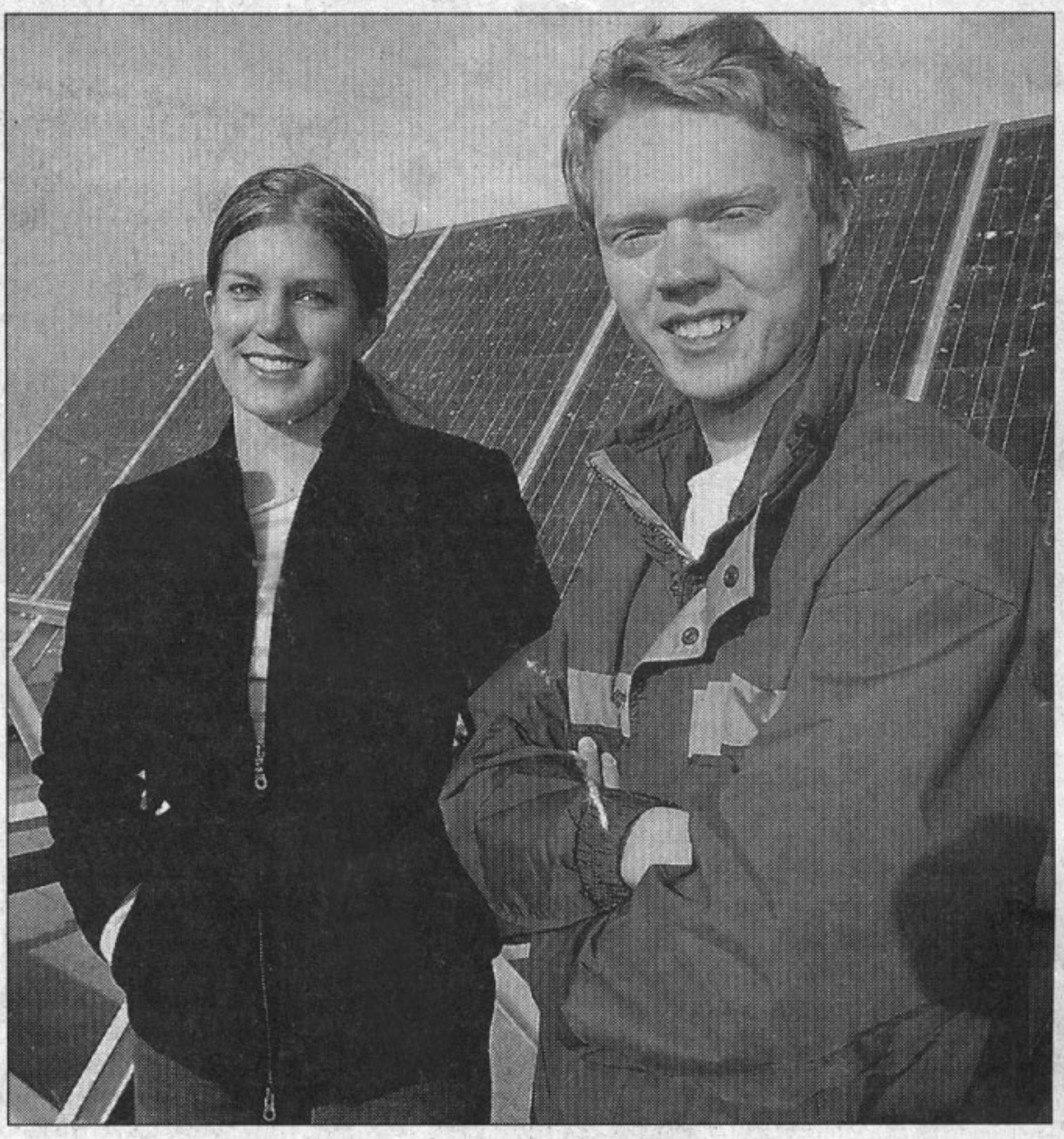
A template for other schools to follow is found on the school's website (www.blinddrop.com/chs—solar/).

A large portion of time was spent going through the paperwork and bureaucracy for grants and regulatory approval. The biggest stumbling block was getting approval to hook into the electrical grid, a process that took months.

The teens' trailblazing efforts are being applauded by no less than David Suzuki, Canada's best-known environmentalist.

"Youth has got to be involved and here's an inspiring example," says Suzuki, who learned of their work when Bennett sent him an invitation to the project's dedication ceremony.

"If you decide to do something, you can achieve a lot," says Suzuki, who hopes the enthusiasm can be maintained as many of the teens involved leave high school and go on with their lives.



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Denyse Skipper, left, and Julian Chesterman, both Grade 12 students at Cochrane High School, raised over $47,000 with their classmates to pay for solar panels that with generate a portion of the Alberta school's electricity.