Sun shines again on UWO, Wisconsin Public Service, high schools 'Solar Olympics'

by Derek Paulus - Thursday, May 16, 2013

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“Solar” was the word of the day May 14 at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh as high school students from across the state convened to create, build and display all things powered and inspired by the sun.

The stellar symposium was part of the 17th annual Solar Olympics, an event hosted by the SolarWise for Schools program, an educational initiative of Wisconsin Public Service.

SolarWise for Schools began in 1996 as a science-based educational program from the Wisconsin Public Service Community Foundation. The program provides participating high schools within the Wisconsin Public Service area with curriculum on renewable energy. Since its inception, 50 schools have joined the program.

SolarWise for Schools Manager Mike Moore said the Solar Olympics are a culmination of everything the students learned over the course of their classroom education on renewable energy. It is an opportunity for students to put classroom lessons into practice.

Students demonstrated their knowledge by racing solar powered cars, displaying solar cookers and water heaters, presenting their renewable energy essays and showing off their energy inspired artwork. Competitions in t-shirt design and solar Jeopardy were also held. Prizes of bronze, silver and gold medals were awarded for the winning schools in each category, as determined by a team of judges.

Ben Mitchell, a student from Green Bay Southwest High School, said the education he received broadened his knowledge on the subject of renewable energy.

“I care about the environment but in terms of energy and stuff… I didn’t know anything before I took the class,” he said.

Mitchell was involved in the community outreach portion of the event, in which students were expected to present a persuasive argument to a community group that creates awareness to the subject of renewable energy and encourages people to support school efforts in this area. Mitchell and his school earned second place in this category.

Moore said UW Oshkosh is a good example of putting these ideas into practice.

“This University is doing a fantastic job of living… sustainability,” he said.

UW Oshkosh is one of three schools that alternate as hosts of the Solar Olympics each year. Last year’s event took place at UW-Stevens Point; UW-Green Bay is also host. Both UW Oshkosh and UW-Stevens

Point were among 21 schools across the nation that were awarded a spot on *The Princeton Review*'s 2013 Green College Honor Roll.

Ken Kozak, a Wisconsin Public Service coordinator at the Solar Olympics, said he has an engineering background and was involved in the approval of UW Oshkosh's anaerobic dry fermentation biodigester, which generates energy from the gas produced by decomposing plant and food waste. Kozak said the University has a "delightful campus" with great diversity between old and new buildings.

"It's efficient, it has the diversity… and you have some awesome folks that run this University," he said.

In welcoming the Solar Olympics competitors to campus, Chancellor Richard Wells stressed the many ways that the University has integrated renewable energy technology and sustainable practices into the campus community. UW Oshkosh features sun-tracking solar arrays outside Sage Hall, an Environmental Research and Innovation Center that helps test swimming beach waters and a soon-to-launch University Studies Program, the transformed UW Oshkosh general education program launching this fall that will include an understanding of sustainable practices as one of its key facets.

"There are many reasons why UW Oshkosh has built a national reputation and distinction as being Wisconsin's most sustainable University," Wells said.

And the same form of education and practices of sustainability are the goal of SolarWise for Schools. In addition to educational curriculum, each participating high school receives a solar-electric system that supplies a portion of the school's electrical needs. According to SolarWise, if each high school in the Wisconsin Public Service area implemented one of these systems, it would eliminate the need to burn 225,500 pounds of coal, which would prevent 470,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions. In addition, over the course of 20 years, each school using this system will have produced 60,000 kilowatt-hours of clean electricity and saved $7,000 in energy costs.

SolarWise for Schools was awarded the 2013 Green Power Leadership Award for Best Green Power Education by the Center for Resource Solutions for its educational efforts.

Kozak said that UW Oshkosh and those schools who are also part of the SchoolWise for Schools educational partnership can feel confident that these efforts will not go to waste.

"You can never forget that your money is well spent on efficiency," he said.

See more:

- Snapshots: Solar Olympics at UW Oshkosh