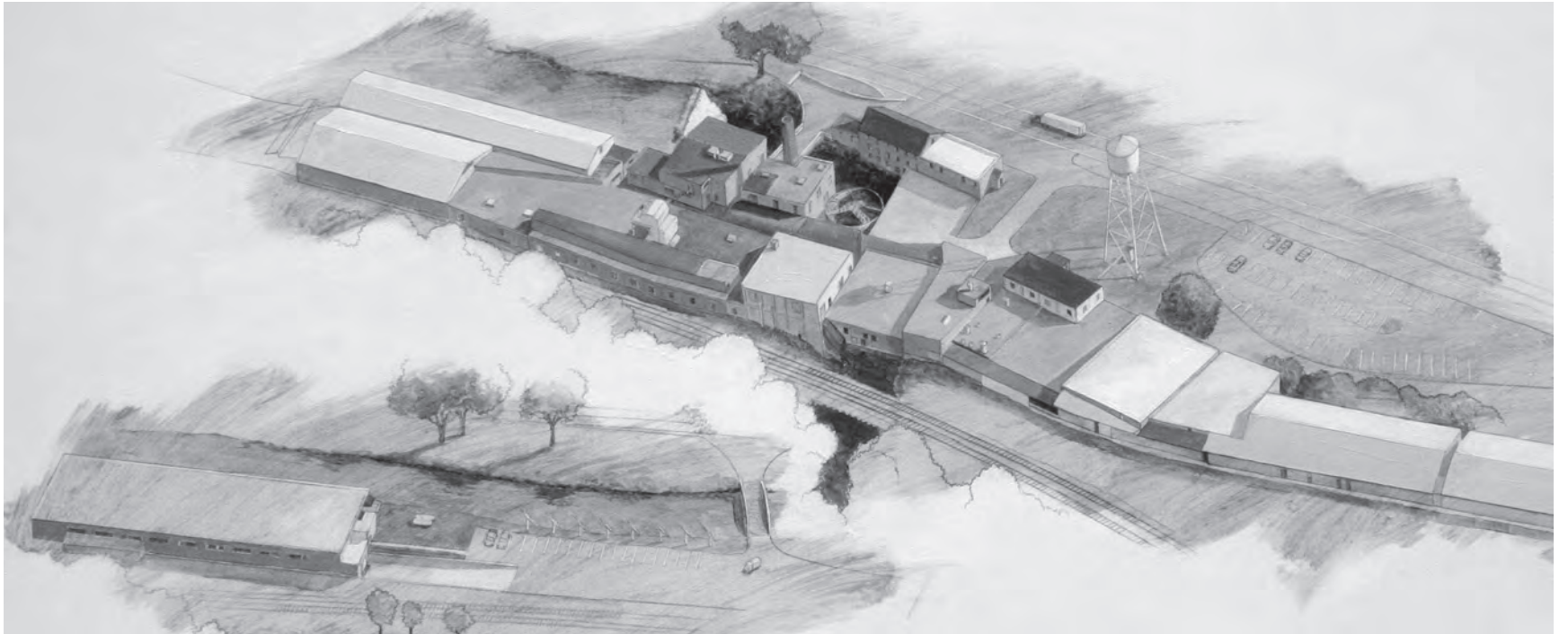


Charged and ready

Energy conservation is critical. Jody Rael and his family and friends are bringing the community together around solar energy and art at what used to be the Columbia Box Board Mill – now Solaqua Power and Art.



A sketch of the proposed retrofit of the old Box Board Mill – Solaqua.

By Allison Marchese

Jody Rael is all about energy. The founder of SunDog Solar and Solaqua Power & Art on Route 295 in Chatham runs on 1000 watts and is supercharged to get the message out to the community about the importance of energy conservation.

Following in his family footsteps, Rael and a team of his kids, friends, local talent and transplants are working to help homeowners and businesses install solar, and to train individuals to work in the emerging industry.

“I lived with a father who was always inventing and he’d come home excited wanting to discuss his ideas.”

Rael now walks in similar shoes. Today he is a 60-something father, still sporting a salt and pepper pony tail and also founder of Kling Magnetics, SunDog Solar, and Solaqua Power & Art – which is proving to be one of the most ambitious projects in the region, combining art with renewable energy.

Solaqua is his dream

Rael plans to transform the 100,000 square foot former Columbia Box Board Mill into a green business incubator and arts center, powered by renewable energy, complete with artist studios, performance, gallery and retail space, and a regional foods restaurant. Rael also hopes to create a community land trust on the surrounding 180 acres, featuring an eco-village with affordable solar-integrated houses that could be pre-fabricated at the mill.

Rael grew up in New York City and spent weekends with his family in Chatham.

“I learned to be inventive and used to win the science fairs.”

Rael’s first invention was in the fourth grade. Rael mentions influences like Telsa who “invented AC and our whole electric system although we give the credit to Edison.”

He says his curiosity for inventing made it difficult for him to find academics inspiring and after a year and a half at college he dropped out.

“I’ve had a lifelong interest in the arts and renewable energy and at that point I really wanted to create something.” Rael became a carpenter in British Columbia, Canada, where he dabbled in solar power, designing and constructing early versions of a solar-powered PA system. He eventually returned to New York in the mid 1980s.

Back in New York Rael took over the magnetics division of his father’s company and

began powering his reserve of ideas. In 1984 he moved his business from Queens, NY to Hudson.

“Ironically, the old mill where we are now on Route 295 was the first building I looked at but the owners of the Columbia Box Board were in negotiations to sell so they wouldn’t consider a lease. So when Columbia announced their closing date, I called and said I wanted it – that was 1997.”

Rael says he always had his eye on something larger.

“When we finally had 100,000 extra square feet my first thought was to turn it into an artists center. When I saw the waterfall I immediately thought about powering the mill with carbon-free energy.”

SunDog was launched in 2004 and shares office space with Kling and Solaqua.

Fulfilling a need

“In 2003 I went to Solarfest in Vermont because I had been building solar-powered PA systems. Solar panels were hard to get and expensive then. I had to buy used 30 watt panels from a dismantled solar farm in California for \$300.” Rael saw a real need for a local installer and recalled people complaining about the lack of service in the solar industry.

“I thought it made sense to put a business together with my team, and enhance the front end by focusing on customer service.”

Rael’s team includes the third generation, Rebecca Boyd, Rael’s daughter and Marketing Director for Kling and SunDog Solar, and his son Ben who manages sales orders and customer requests.

Rebecca says she’s on board with her dad’s vision.

“It’s fascinating to have a dad who is fearless. Other people describe him that way and it’s primarily the reason for his success.”

People often ask Rael when Solaqua Power & Art, a massive four-phase project will be finished (the Solaqua masterplan can be viewed online at solaqua.org.)

“All our resources and profits from our companies are going into making Solaqua happen. We’re working toward a 501 c3 status to encourage donors and partners.”

“If I finance this alone it could take ten years, but with the right help, it could happen sooner. I’m looking for people interested in becoming part of the Solaqua community. Right now we’re encouraging green businesses, industrial artisans and investors to get in on the ground floor.”

SunDog powers Solaqua

SunDog is the fuel powering the Solaqua project and the timing for installation of solar couldn’t be better.

“Solar is affordable,” says Betsy Ferris Wyman, Vice President of SunDog and a solar educator in the community.

“There’s really never been a better time to purchase a solar energy system because of industry prices and generous incentives. We’re also developing a new solar leasing program for residential, non-profit, municipalities, schools and commercial customers. The leasing program enables anyone to go solar with little or no money down, and still benefit from substantially lower monthly electricity costs. This program eliminates the large initial upfront investment to install a system.”

“We’re training individuals in the solar thermal business and plans are underway to open a center dedicated totally to training,” says Wyman.

“In this region it’s difficult for people to stay and find jobs, so we do outreach to inspire people/students, and by creating green collar jobs they can stay in the area and work.”

Current solar projects include the Parker School, Camp Hill in Copake and the Darrow School in New Lebanon.

Jody Rael says that through the years he’s learned that some things take time and that he’s been preparing his whole life for a project like this one.

“People seem hungry for community and we feel the community is behind both the renewable energy movement and the creation of Solaqua,” says Rael. “As a longtime resident this project is my way of giving back.”