

Alumnus David Warner on resilient building practices, the Human Needs Project, Metallica, and giving back to Cal

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This month, we caught up with one of our distinguished alumni, David Warner (Conservation & Resource Studies, 1976), founder and owner of [Redhorse Constructors](#). He also acts as a technical advisor for Sir Richard Branson's sustainable island development project.

David lends his hand to a number of philanthropic activities. He is a member of the College of Natural Resources (CNR) Advisory Board, and in 2009, he became involved with the Marin History Museum for which he organized a Metallica benefit concert. Most recently, David and actress Connie Nielsen, launched the [Human Needs Project](#), an effort to bring energy, clean water, and technology to slums around the world via self-sustaining community based pods.

(Now you know why catching up with David was a challenge!)

You've been doing green construction before there was a term for it. What motivated you to pursue this?

What is called green construction I'm now calling resilient building practices. I hate to get bogged down with terminology that has become "main stream". The whole idea loses its inertia if the description of the craft isn't appropriate for what the ultimate goals are. Hence, green construction / green building / sustainable construction / "build it green" are all dancing around the same camp fire of implementing resilience into construction practices and policies. Adaptability in our ever-changing world is key. I was motivated to become a builder based on the fact that our built environment has the largest impact on our global ecosystem and I felt I could affect the greatest change with something I loved to do.

Some undergraduates may be interested in how you've managed to combine financial success with a green enterprise. Any advice for those students?

Financial success always stems from having a clear vision, innovative ideas and Herculean efforts. A green enterprise is exactly that. It is the forward-thinking push that can create dynamic business plans, which will always trend true, especially when coupled with scalability. No matter what the "green enterprise" is, if it's truly forward thinking and can be scaled, it's game on.

You are on the College of Natural Resources Advisory Board. Why did you decide to give back to Cal, and what opportunities do you see for CNR in the new millennia?



Being on the advisory board for CNR and giving back to Cal is basically how I'm built. Without Cal and CNR I would not be in the position of where I am today, both with my family and with my business. The opportunity CNR has to offer in the new millennia is to become the dominant go-to college to help solve our global environmental problems and for CNR to come up with the science and policies that will create a vital advocacy for the environment and foster future business opportunities. It is very rare that a college is academically integrated with other disciplines where science, policy, energy resources, business and agriculture all live in one home. The tools to solve the global environmental issues are not single-handed. They are all interrelated. That is ultimately the hidden treasure within CNR.

The Human Needs Project is probably, even for you, a big undertaking. Do you ever lie awake at night and ask yourself how you got yourself into this?

Like most things I do, I typically never look at the consequences of my decisions but I'm always taken by the first glance of all the opportunities. This approach, as your question asks, does lead to sleepless nights since achieving the opportunities sometimes outpaces the reality of getting the job done. [The Human Needs Project](#) (HNP), which is a NGO whose goal is to deliver integrated solutions to poverty and specifically to the second largest slum in Africa (Kibera), has taken all my extra time to focus on. HNP's charter is to bring affordable and reliable infrastructure to slums or other marginalized communities through clean technology.

Without my co-founder, [Connie Nielsen](#), who runs at the same RPM I do, I do not believe we would have achieved the success we are now having in getting our project launched and under construction in Africa. Even with HNP, CNR has played a big role in this effort with the [Environmental Leadership Program](#). We were able to have HNP's African director attend a very formative leadership course where she was exposed to many of the global trends and was able to meet other like-minded NGO leaders who are trying to exercise big change in marginalized communities and marginalized ecosystems.

Metallica and green construction. Tell us more!

I've been very fortunate to do projects with the band, where we have used our resilient green construction ideas to create valued projects. At Metallica Headquarters, sound rooms, rehearsal rooms and administrative areas were built using recycled building products to create some of the best sound rooms the band has ever played in. Originally, part of the building was used as a jam room for the Grateful Dead to practice in. Much of the wood and finished systems were recomposed and repurposed for the new functions that Metallica wanted. The carpeting was used as an inner layer between acoustic sandwiches to create sound deadening and sound absorption panels. The concrete foundation was ground up and reused in the new foundation as a recycled concrete aggregate. On the air mechanical systems, we introduced a strong tempered fresh air component into the control room where typically control rooms use recycled air that get overcharged with electrical heat and insulation off-gassing. We even used extra spray paint left over from the project (and found inside the building) that became graffiti for outside of the building as part of the design. The band was very motivated to go as far as they could with reuse, recycle and maintaining the high quality standards for their recording environment.

Redhorse has also built recording studios such as Studio Trilogy (formerly Talking House) in San Francisco where low VOC, exterior air inputs, natural light, repurposing an automotive repair shop, and open air ventilation were all embedded in the John Storyk design (designer of Jimi Hendrix's Electric Lady Studios).

My underlying edict really is that no matter where you go, you can always push for any beachhead that has yet to be developed and you can push the science along with it. Working with musicians has given me great opportunities to innovate green building systems into areas where they are typically not employed.

Any final thoughts for fellow alums?

I believe it is good for all alums to revisit Cal and know what Cal provides as resources for what you're doing in today's world. Cal offers opportunities to partner-up and Cal will put boots in the field on challenging new projects where white papers need to be developed to push along new thoughts and enterprises. I have found this to be one of the best surprises as an alum in going back to Cal to serve on the advisory board. I will say Cal needs the alums input to make sure we remain one of the top public universities in the world. Cal needs to grapple with the new economy where public funding is diminishing. To offset that, private business needs to be embedded in the academic institutions, working hand in hand for the future of both. Alums are essential to this growth.