

Gainesville's 28 Most Interesting People – Erich Christian

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by Nicole La Haz
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At an eighth-grade marine biology program in The Bahamas, Erich Christian noticed something. The island functioned as its own energy community. It utilized wind and solar power, and converted cooking oil from cruise lines into biodiesel. It inspired Erich, now 18, to create a biodiesel production facility at his former high school, Gainesville's Oak Hall.

He envisioned a plant at his school that would convert vegetable oil into fuel that could power machines like the school's lawn equipment.

Solidifying the plan took two to three years for Erich and three peers, beginning with a ninth-grade science project. Erich tested different biodiesel from cooking oils, then began researching legislation to obtain a permit for creating the plant.

The project that Erich envisioned became reality his junior year. After garnering enough community support and applying online for grants, they obtained a processor and housing facility on the school's campus.

"The shed," as Erich calls it, sits behind the science labs and converts cooking oil from sources including local restaurants and a Rotary club into biodiesel fuel. Each batch takes approximately 24 hours to create.

His fervor and knowledge led to Erich's appointment to the Alachua County Commission's Energy Conservation Strategies Committee soon after.

Erich, who now studies environmental science and policy at Florida State University, won a 2010 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Each year since 1999, *The Lost Years of Merlin* epic author T. A. Barron awards 10 young leaders from the nation with \$2,500, which Erich used toward his education.

"I didn't expect to win the award," he says, but Erich always had faith in the project. His goal was for students to learn about the biodiesel process and utilize that information, just as he did at The Island School.

"They were the leading aspects of my life in high school: school and the project," he says. "It wasn't something that just interested me; it was a passion."