

Watauga Family Wins Big in Energy Efficiency Competition

Written by Steve Frank
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Getting the kids involved in a fun summer challenge has paid off for a Watauga County family. “It was a lot of fun for the whole family and I think the biggest shocker for us was how much hot water we were using,” said Nancy Isaacs, whose family was the grand prize winner of the Watauga County Home Energy Savings Challenge sponsored by Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation. The Isaacs include husband Travis, and their sons Parker, 6; Connor, 9; and J.T., 11.

The Isaacs won the competition by reducing their electricity usage (kilowatt hour consumption) by the greatest percentage for the month of May as compared to April. Residents who live in Watauga County and have Blue Ridge Electric as their electric provider were eligible to participate.

“When we entered the competition, we set a goal to keep our daily electricity costs under \$2,” said Nancy. “We felt that was a reasonable goal given that our costs were running about \$3.50.”

Nancy and Travis say they’re thrilled that entering the competition created some new habits for their family that’s still producing benefits: their daily electricity costs now average \$1.88.

In addition to saving on their monthly electricity bill, the Isaacs received a grand prize package including a Home Energy Audit worth \$500 from High Country Energy Solutions, a \$100 gift certificate from Crippens Country Inn and Restaurant, two tickets to see An Appalachian Summer Festival’s Outdoor Fireworks Concert featuring Dierks Bentley; and a \$100 credit to Blue Ridge Electric’s online energy efficiency store.

What’s the secret of success of this family of five young children for reducing their electricity usage?

“It was actually a lot of fun,” said Travis, whose co-worker told him about the competition. All three sons now go behind mom and dad, flipping switches if they happen to leave a light on when leaving a room.

Nancy said she and Travis immediately began using the shower timer that came with a “thank you” kit given to those who entered the competition. “Before we used the timer, I would’ve sworn we were taking just a few minutes in the shower. Using the timer made me realize we were taking much, much longer than I imagined. It taught us we could take shorter showers, use less hot water, and still get clean,” explained Nancy.

Other ways the Isaacs reduced energy usage was to use their washing machine’s “energy efficient” setting. “We do a lot of laundry and I realized our clothes got just as clean and smelled just as good when washed in cold water rather than warm.” Using the special setting also cut the wash cycle by 15 minutes and saved water, she added. The family is also using a clothes line to dry their clothes this summer—an energy saving step that gets Parker, Connor and J.T. involved.

The Isaacs also replaced all the light bulbs in their home with energy efficient compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), which can be purchased in any local Blue Ridge Electric office at discounted prices, and turned up their summertime thermostat setting from 70 degrees to 76. A key step in tracking their usage and learning what steps had an impact, Nancy said, was to sign up for Blue Ridge Electric’s free daily electricity monitoring service known as MyUsage.com. The service is available from a quick link at www.BlueRidgeEMC.com.

“We checked MyUsage at least once a day and it’s a really neat service,” said Nancy. “We literally could see the impact of our efforts the very next day,” she explained. After entering a few key pieces of information, a Blue Ridge member can sign up for MyUsage which shows

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how much electricity is used, the cost, and the impact of local temperatures. Members can also set alerts at which they want to be notified if their usage rises above the level they choose. The idea for the competition came from Janet Miller, a long-time Watauga County resident and graduate student at Appalachian State University majoring in Building Science. She proposed the project to Blue Ridge Electric to help meet her degree requirements and worked with the cooperative to design and promote it. She'll be evaluating how well the competition raised awareness of energy efficiency and incorporated both social media and other tools to educate and engage consumers.

A key component of the competition was the creation of the Blue Ridge Green Smart Facebook page which Miller managed throughout the campaign with tips, quizzes and trivia. Those active on the GreenSmart Facebook site were eligible for weekly gift cards to Lowes Home Improvement store.

Another key component was the use of local "celebrities"—well known individuals and business owners in the community who stepped up to be first to "Join the Challenge." Their photos and short testimonials were used in newspaper ads and on the GreenSmart Facebook page to raise awareness of the competition, encourage participation and help educate on the importance of being energy efficient.

"We congratulate the Isaacs for winning the competition but most importantly for their success in finding ways to reduce energy and costs for their household," said Doug Johnson, chief executive officer of Blue Ridge Electric. "They've begun establishing new habits that will have long-lasting effects and we're glad the competition helped jumpstart that effort."

Johnson said the cooperative was also pleased to be able to support an ASU student in her project. "Janet Miller had done her research before proposing the competition. She had a lot of good, practical ideas that could benefit any energy user by helping inspire us all to be more energy efficient. As a result of this competition, we hope our members are more aware of the free tools and services offered by Blue Ridge Electric and will take advantage of them," said Johnson, referencing the online tools available at www.BlueRidgeEMC.com.

To check out Blue Ridge Electric's free online energy efficiency tools and information, visit www.BlueRidgeEMC.com. The competitions' Facebook page is still available and will now be used to continue educating on energy efficiency tips and possible future fun competitions like the gift card giveaways for active participants on the page. Learn more at www.Facebook.com/BlueRidgeGreenSmart.