

Twenty Years At the Front of the Solarcoaster

Ohio's Family-Owned Third Sun Solar Has Seen it All as Leaders of Clean Energy

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By Linda Koffman

FEATURING:



Geoff Greenfield
Founder and President

Third Sun Solar
thirdsunsolar.com

Before the internet—and clean energy—had gone fully mainstream, Geoff Greenfield used to flip through the pages of Home Power magazine reading how-to tips. It was there that he learned to build a very DIY solar system for his off-the-grid family home in Athens County, Ohio, back in 1997: He and his wife bolted together 55-watt modules using pressure-treated 4x4 posts they stuck in the ground. “It wasn’t code-compliant, it wasn’t high-performance, and it wasn’t anything we’d do today,” he laughs.

He couldn’t have known then that 20 years later, the two would still be building a solar project together. Only this time, that project is a successful company celebrating two decades of business. Meet Third Sun Solar.

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With Geoff as President and his wife, Michelle, as CEO, the two founders have seen the many ups and downs of the industry since launching their company in 2000. As Michelle states in a recent 20-year commemorative video, “Third Sun Solar has not just ridden the solar coaster, we have been part of the architects of the solar coaster.”

Third Sun Solar’s mission is “to accelerate the shift to clean energy.” The company entered 2020 with 1,026 completed projects worth more than \$70.5 million

over the life of the business. And they were just ranked #1 in Ohio and #50 in the nation by the Solar Power World Top Solar Contractors in 2020 for lifetime residential solar total installed kW.

From massive commercial installations—like Denison University, multiple Cuyahoga County facilities, and the Akron Metro Transit Center, to name a few—to residential, nonprofit,

and governmental systems, they’ve done it all.

So, after all these years, what projects stand out as favorites? Speaking from the porch of his solar-powered net-zero home on a fall afternoon in Ohio—the home that started it all—Geoff explains why, despite

the large commercial jobs, it's still the residential client that gets him.

"It's a tradition to have the customer throw the switch," he says of each completed home installation. "It's wonderful seeing a grown man cry about their new solar system, something they've been reading about in Popular Science magazine since they were 13...It's like we're making people's dreams come true."

As a B Corporation focused on doing good, today Third Sun Solar is navigating pandemic times. Luckily, business is still booming as the residential solar market only gains traction. The company has continued hiring this year (growing to 36 employees) and Geoff says they're projected to end 2020 with 122% business this year to last.

Still, the most rewarding or far-reaching installations aren't necessarily determined by size or dollars. The intention to create a better, cleaner future is always at the heart of Third Sun Solar. It's evident as Geoff recalls building a series of 1kW demonstration projects at elementary schools across Appalachia many years ago.

"Those kids are probably in their 20s now, and my hope is that they become leaders in their various organizations," Geoff begins, "and that they go back to that 6th-grade workshop and say, 'I did solar in 6th grade and it's not esoteric—it's practical, functional

energy. It's not just for sunny San Diego, because we installed solar at my school.'"

Looking forward, he remains optimistic about a solar industry that's recovered from the "COVID slump," and he wants to reassure others of this bright future. Regardless of U.S. politics and a volatile global economy, he says, clean energy will continue to be where it's at as a prosperous and necessary business.

"The inevitable future is solar," he asserts. "The question is how quickly it happens, not whether or not it will happen."

Why Omnidian?

Third Sun Solar partnered with Omnidian in June 2020, during the economic downturn caused by a pandemic.

Third Sun Solar President and Founder Geoff Greenfield tells why.

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What convinced you to add the Omnidian package in the middle of a struggling economy?

Our conclusion was that it actually adds value that offsets any added cost. Again, with our long-term approach to the solar sales and marketing world, we think that customer satisfaction is second only to safety in terms of what's important to our business. A happy customer is part of our future sales prospects. With our focus on having satisfied, happy customers, we knew we had to improve the customer experience for service. The other factor is that as systems

have gotten more complex, with that complexity has come more service calls. So we thought it was important that we change along with the changing marketplace and add a better promise for our service than just saying, “Hey, we’ll take care of it,” but effectively having what could be thought of as an insurance program. We have [the Omnidian plan] standard for residential, and as an ad hoc offering for commercial systems.

You’ve witnessed it all in your 20 years of business. How does what Omnidian offers reflect a changing solar industry?

We’ve watched the industry evolve over 20 years and one thing that’s happening is that as the ecosystem matures, there are people that get really, really good at service, maintenance, diagnostics, and tech support. And instead of us trying to build a customer service desk ready to answer questions and help customers troubleshoot, we thought it was a better level of customer service to have Omnidian ready at the other end of the phone.

What made Omnidian stand out when you were choosing a system protection plan?

At the end of the day, somebody gave me advice that there are only three kinds of problems in business: people problems, people problems, and people problems. You can flip them around in an optimistic way and say there are only three things that make

things go well: people, people, or people. It truly was the people at Omnidian that was as important as anything else when we were evaluating solutions to our growing service and maintenance offering. When we were evaluating outsourcing and partnering with an outside organization, we looked at a few different folks and one reason we settled on Omnidian was a “spidey sense” gut-check that the people of Omnidian were trustworthy, smart, passionate customer

service focused on safety and technology. It’s a for-profit business, and we’re a for-profit business, but our focus wasn’t on a get-rich-quick mentality; it was building a solid business and being a good partner over the long term. We knew [Omnidian Director of Strategic Alliances Barrett Miles] from doing previous business, and we’d met Omnidian

people and how they were approaching the market. So a big chunk of the evaluation of who to work with was based on personality, reputation, and the team—who they are and the culture.

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