



Giller will do just about anything for the cause, including a quick dip in Quartermaster Harbor, which his house on Vashon Island overlooks.



# Sweating the Big Stuff

AT BROWN, CHIP GILLER '93 SHUNNED clothes dryers and hung his wet laundry in his dorm room. A decade later, he's teaching a Web-savvy generation that you can save the planet and still have a few laughs along the way.

By Jessica Kowal '89

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN SMALE

# A

**S A BROWN STUDENT, CHIP GILLER WOKE UP EVERY** morning and fretted about how consumption in America was ruining the environment. It pained him to see a roommate hold open a refrigerator door and waste valuable chilled air before deciding what to eat. When another roommate plugged an answering machine into a wall socket, Giller cringed, imagining an endless and needless

hemorrhage of energy.

To teach conservation by example, he shunned electric clothes dryers and hung his laundry on a clothesline tacked to the walls of his freshman dorm room. To dramatize the wastefulness of a typical Brown student, he carried his own garbage around campus for a week—in a clear plastic bag. And he asserted—quietly in college, but more boldly when his friends started their own

families—that having a baby in America was the best way to guarantee the further squandering of the world's resources.

Giller's obsessions struck some of his friends as sanctimony, and they needled him about it. Before he was allowed to open his Secret Santa gift at Christmas one year, he was ordered to flush all the toilets, turn on all the showers, and switch on all the lights in his freshman unit's coed bathroom. Other friends worried that Giller, a wiry student with sandy hair that fell below his shoulders and glasses that covered half his face, was



so focused on protecting the environment that he was failing to eat enough to protect his own health.

Slowly, Giller got the message: Environmental piety does not change behavior. Nobody likes being lectured to by a holier-than-thou greenie. It makes people furious. It makes them want to leave that refrigerator door open.

#### **FIFTEEN YEARS LATER,**

Giller, who is now thirty-four, hasn't forgotten what he learned at Brown. At a time when environmentalists are often viewed as either just another special-interest group or a bunch of doomsayers standing in the way of economic progress, Giller is trying to encourage a less hysterical approach. He is the founder and president of the increasingly influential [Grist.org](http://Grist.org), a Seattle-based environmental-news Web site that skewers green sanctimony while delivering deeply reported, we-are-in-trouble stories on issues such as global warming and the Bush administration's manipulation of science to suit the needs

COURTESY CHIP GILLER



Freshman year taught Giller, opposite, that sanctimony turns people off; now he's using humor to proselytize.

of industry. Grist's motto is "Gloom and doom with a sense of humor." The humor is most visibly expressed in its headlines; when the Bush administration tried to undermine European governments' efforts to test the public-health impact of industrial chemicals, Grist titled its story "No Chemical Left Behind."

Clearly, gloom and doom about the environment has lost a lot of its appeal lately. Such mainstream environmental organizations as the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society, have come to appeal mostly to men and women who are

white, over fifty, and often caricatured—not entirely without reason—as affluent, Prius-driving purists intent on saving every tree or salmon. Younger Americans, meanwhile, tend to be cynical about traditional party politics and bureaucratized activism. They don't join environmental groups in large numbers, even though they may have taught their parents about recycling and carry Nalgene camping bottles everywhere they go.

Giller thinks he may have found a way to reach both groups. "Grist is about being informed, it's about thinking about the

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THE FOOD WE EAT, THE CLOTHES WE WEAR, WHAT JOBS ARE AVAILABLE.”**



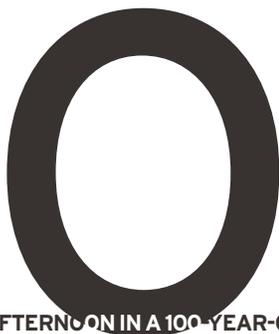
Giller works out regularly at the Vachon Athletic Club, which he's quick to point out uses no electricity.

environment in terms of politics when you vote, and it's 'Don't sweat the small stuff—focus on the big picture,'" he says. "While I choose to make the environment fundamental to each of my decisions, that's not what being an environmentalist is about. It's just understanding that this country needs to advance a debate and advance the ball."

The formula appears to be working. About half a million people now read *Grist* every month, an audience that's nearly tripled since mid-2004. Nearly 40 percent of readers are in their twenties and thirties, about two-thirds are women, and almost 60 percent say they "aren't big on protest marches but always try to put the environment first." Reporters and editors at the nation's largest newspapers are paying attention, too, not least because they see *Grist*'s humor as an antidote to environmentalism's melancholy.

"Not that [*Grist*] isn't serious, but it tends not to be gloomy," says Felicity Barringer, the national environmental correspondent for the *New York Times*. "They're not drinking the Kool-Aid—it's more of a chaser." Even top policy makers are beginning to acknowledge *Grist*'s influence: U.S. Secretary of Energy Samuel Bodman recently consented to an interview on the Web site, and *Grist* writers questioned the Democratic presidential primary candidates in 2004.

Reading *Grist*, says Caroline Karp, a senior lecturer at Brown's environmental studies center who was Giller's senior thesis adviser, "is like watching Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*." She says her students, schooled in the ironic coolness of Stewart's take on the news, may not trust activist groups but they do hunger for the kinds of canny, informed voices they find at the *Grist* Web site.



**ON A MONDAY AFTERNOON IN A 100-YEAR-OLD LOFT BUILD-**ing with views of Seattle's Elliott Bay, Giller convenes a meeting of the editorial staff at an oak conference table picked up, used, for \$200. The office furniture consists mostly of hand-me-downs from dot-com crack-ups, and the windows are open because, of course, there's no air conditioning. Five people sit around the table, and Kathryn Schulz '96, who is Grist's editor-at-large and lives in Brooklyn, is on speakerphone.

Giller has just returned from a rare vacation: a week of backpacking with his wife, Jenny Sorensen, in the Cascade Mountains near the Canadian border. He spent the morning catching up with his staff and sifting through 600 e-mails at his desk, above which hangs a framed cartoon of a frantic duck who is clinging to a small island that's being swamped with waves. The duck holds a sign that reads "Global Warming Sucks." Wearing a hemp shirt and Levi's, but with shorter hair and trendier glasses than he had in college, Giller has become, to his great surprise, a businessman with thirteen employees. For his Web site, which has nonprofit status with the IRS, he raised \$1.2 million in 2005, including \$100,000 from Grist's readers. Next year's budget will be about \$2 million.

At their meeting, the editors discuss upcoming projects. The Grist List, a new e-mail newsletter, will dish up five intriguing ideas for the week, such as eco-friendly sex toys and cell phones that measure pollution. Kathryn Schulz is tracking four new columns about the nexus of business and the environment. Giller wants to assign a writer to review the documentary *Grizzly Man*, about a man eaten by a grizzly bear in Alaska. And columnist Amanda Griscom Little '96 wants suggestions for an upcoming interview with the U.S. energy secretary.

Freshman roommates at Brown, Schulz and Griscom Little, who are both thirty-one, drive some of Grist's most incisive stories and ambitious projects, even though neither describes herself as a lifelong environmentalist. Schulz was working for an English-language newspaper in Santiago, Chile, when Giller contacted her about joining the Grist staff. She started a few days after September 11, 2001, planned to stay for a few months, and has been working there full- or part-time ever since.

Giller and Schulz plot their next big story, about the impact of depopulation, or slow population growth, in Northern Europe. "The question for Grist is, do shrinking populations mean economic decline for developed countries?" Schulz told Giller. "It's a serious story: economics and the environmental divide." Schulz has also leaped into such urban environmental-justice issues as contaminated water, lead paint in housing, polluted air, and asthma rates, a shift prompted by conversations last year with Giller and Michelle DePass, a program officer at

the Ford Foundation who is now on Grist's board of directors. (The Ford Foundation has given \$200,000 to Grist in recent years, but DePass was not involved in those decisions.)

"Like any social justice movement, there are not a lot of venues where you can bring these issues to the table," DePass says. "The whole way that they [Grist] approach newsmaking allows them more flexibility. It opens up the space to actually bring this stuff in and to talk about it."

Griscom Little, who lives in Nashville, dissects federal government policies, officials, and political candidates in her Grist column, "Muckraker," which also appears on Salon.com and MSNBC.com. "I fall into the category of, as Grist calls it, a 'light green reader,'" says Griscom Little, although she admits she evangelizes about her new Prius. "Probably the most important perspective that I have and can bring to Grist is that I live south of the Mason-Dixon line, where the environmental movement has very little attraction," she adds. "There's a certain kind of tunnel vision that comes with living that 'pure lifestyle' in places like Seattle, New York, and L.A."

Their Internet canvas allows Grist's editors to report on the environment both more broadly and in more detail than most news organizations. After two political strategists declared "the death of environmentalism" in the fall of 2004, Grist launched a debate about their ideas and invited writers, activists, and readers to weigh in. In 2001, when Bjorn Lomborg, a Danish statistics professor and author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, said that global warming, pollution, and pesticides were "phantom problems," Grist invited a biologist, climate scientists, and population experts to analyze his methods and conclusions.

At the same time, Grist weighs in on the micro issues of living green, the details that can strangle people with guilt. In the entertaining and informative "Ask Umbra" column, the fictional Umbra Fisk—who thinks suspiciously like Giller—tackles readers' eco-dilemmas without sermonizing. Is it better to pour juice from large plastic jugs into plastic cups, or to serve juice boxes? (Use paper cups!) Disposable diapers or cloth diapers? (It doesn't matter, because the landfill impact of disposables equals the energy used to wash, dry, and transport the cloth versions.) Tampons vs. sanitary napkins? (Don't fret about small items, but consider buying a "menstrual cup.") After a reader asked Umbra how to deal with vacationing friends who drive thirty miles to get a takeout latte, Umbra commiserated that she, too, had faced "the rock of stupid vacation driving, the hard place of social ostracism." Her answer was, "Tell them environmentalism is your passion, not their obligation" and "see if there is a compromise that will not make you barf."

# P

His sophomore year, Giller lived, cooked, and studied with fourteen housemates at West House, Brown's environmental coop.

**PRACTICALLY FROM BIRTH, GILLER FIT NEATLY INTO THE** modern green movement's upper-middle-class mainstream. His father, a health care executive, and mother, an editor of children's books, took their sons Chip and Jeremy '98, for walks in Vermont, where Robert Frost wrote his poetry, and around Walden Pond, near their hometown of Lexington, Massachusetts. Giller grew up reading Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard and vacationing on Martha's Vineyard.

His parents were "fanatical readers" of news, and Giller, in high school, tracked the bylines of reporters at the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*. He was also something of a political nerd. After he dressed up as then-governor Michael Dukakis for Halloween, complete with heavy, black eyebrows, Giller wrote a flattering letter to the governor, who then invited him to visit.

Before he went to college, Giller signed up for a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) course, a month of hiking in the mountains and old-growth forests of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. He did a solo bushwhack off the trail in a dense forest of cedar and pine, an experience that he says profoundly influenced his thinking. "It was like hiking in a natural car wash—branches, leaves in your face," Giller says. "In a place like that, you recognize the world doesn't necessarily revolve around you or humanity."

At Brown, his obsession with conservation grew rapidly. James Corless '90, who launched the Brown Is Green program to decrease the University's energy use, remembers the time he and Giller arranged to survey light-bulbs in the geological sciences department. To enter a room filled with space rocks, they donned white jumpsuits, white booties, and little hats to guard against human contamination. "Chip was fully suited up," Corless recalls, "and he was ready to go explore the moon-rock room to figure out how to save a few kilowatts. It was hilarious."

Professors in the Center for Environmental Studies, and especially Professor Harold Ward, then the center's director, taught him to harness his passion for nature to achieve practical results. He tested for lead poisoning in decaying Victorian houses, which familiarized him with community groups, poor people with children, and the state health department. For his senior thesis, he interviewed farmers

and town planners in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, to recommend land-use policies to protect more farmland. "My fascination with environmental issues isn't about wilderness," Giller says. "It's more connecting the environment to people's everyday lives: the food we eat, the clothes we wear, what jobs are available." At the regular Thursday lunch lectures at the Center for Environmental Studies, where Giller helped make homegrown vegetable soup, his professors didn't group him with students more prone to speechifying. Giller was quieter about his green philosophy. Not likely to run for Congress, thought Harold Ward, who says Giller was "softer, trying to search out the way he was going to make his own contributions."

**GILLER MEANDERED ABOUT FOR A FEW YEARS AFTER** college, shoveling cow manure at an organic farm, working in the bulk foods section at a gourmet grocery, and eventually driving to Paonia, Colorado, to intern at *High Country News*, an environmental publication. When his plan to launch a similar publication in Portland, Oregon, fell apart, he served beer in a micro-brewery, sometimes forgetting to take off his bicycle helmet.

In 1995 Giller became an editor at Greenwire, a Washington, D.C.-based news service that covers federal environmental and energy policies. Subscribers—mainly White House and congressional officials, corporate types, and environmental groups—pay several thousand dollars a year for the service. Unlike a free Internet publication, it didn't reach the masses.

By 1998 Giller approached Denis Hayes, who'd created the Earth Day Network, to discuss a new job. Hayes brought him to Seattle to run the online operations for Earth Day 2000. One-word webzines like Slate, Salon, and Feed were soaking up media adulation at the time and, after considering the name Cud for his new site, Giller chose Grist, because he liked the eco-connotation of "grist for the mill."

Late at night, exhausted by the pace of the start-up, Giller, along with Grist's only other employee at the time, made what turned out to be a fortuitous decision. "We were a little slaphappy and we were putting on silly headlines and puns," Giller says. "That's distinguished us ever since." In April 1999 he e-mailed the first edition of Grist to 100 friends.

By March 2002, it was clear that the



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**"NOT THAT [GRIST] ISN'T SERIOUS, BUT IT TENDS NOT TO BE GLOOMY,"**  
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**"THEY'RE NOT DRINKING THE KOOL-AID—IT'S MORE OF A CHASER."**

Earth Day Network couldn't keep Grist going. Friends, like the environmental writer Bill McKibben, and influential activists, like John Passacantando, the executive director of Greenpeace USA, helped plan the Web site's independent future, and Giller was suddenly transformed from sleepless editor to sleepless publisher. On his way to New York City to meet with charitable foundations, Sorensen, then still his girlfriend, took him to Brooks Brothers to buy a suit and a few wrinkle-free cotton dress shirts. He fretted that the fabrics could not be good for the earth.

Soon enough, though, Giller convinced the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation, a charity developed by a Dutch family that made its fortune selling skylights, to give Grist \$600,000, enough to turn the Web site into a stable, nonprofit company. Before they talked money, Martin S. Kaplan, a Boston attorney and the foundation's U.S. trustee, took Giller, a fanatical Boston Red Sox fan, to a game at Fenway Park and decided he was "a visionary."

"We just think the world of him and Grist, and the importance of encouraging a younger generation to be involved in environmental issues," Kaplan says. "I think these issues are all going to hit them in the face with increasing speed over the next fifteen to twenty years." The foundation has since given Grist another \$700,000 on the condition that Giller, who everyone agrees is a workaholic, take his wife on a few weeks' vacation.

In the long term, the trouble with free, online magazines is that readers don't want to pay for the privilege of reading them. But Grist, like any other start-up company hunting for angel investors, is increasingly asking readers to contribute. In the first two weeks of August this year, Giller, hoping to raise \$35,000, collected \$60,000 from 2,000 readers. People who gave \$50 or more were entered to win a "Global Warming Survival Kit" that included a backpack with a solar panel to power an iPod, a solar-powered hat fan, a hand-crank blender, and five pints of organic ice cream.

Funding challenges aside, Giller believes Grist's future horsepower depends on how quickly it adapts, along with its computer-savvy audience, to cell phone transmission, podcasting, blogs, RSS feeds, or whatever technologies come next. "We're trying to invent something," Giller says. "To the extent that something keeps me up at night, I think: Are we thinking far enough ahead? Are we being visionary enough?"

**ONE RADIANT MORNING LAST SUMMER ON VASHON ISLAND,** a ferry ride away from downtown Seattle, Giller and Sorensen plucked huge, sweet blackberries from wild bushes near the 1908 white-shingled farmhouse they'd recently bought from an Alaska fisherman. With twine, they'd hung large plastic yogurt containers around their necks to keep both hands free, collecting vats of berries for jam.

Sorensen, who is thirty-three and works for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, shares Giller's greenishness. When they began dating and lived in different Seattle neighborhoods, Giller mapped out bus routes for each to take to a common destination. After their September 2003 wedding on Orcas Island, north of Seattle, Giller wrote an article for *Country Living* about their earth-friendly wedding: invitations printed with soy ink, pesticide-free flowers, and an organic vegetarian menu.

Vashon is their Walden, where they talk about installing cisterns to capture rainwater for the farmhouse's flower and vegetable garden. A month after moving in, Giller had set up the couple's plastic worm bin for composting garbage. On a tour of the basement, he laughingly exclaimed, "Here's our pride and joy!"—a front-loading washing machine purchased after he meticulously researched brands that might save energy and water. (This being Seattle, they do have a clothes dryer but prefer to set up clothing racks outside when it's not raining.)

They shop for food that uses as little packaging as possible, bringing their egg cartons back to the store to be refilled. "It's not that he thinks that egg carton is making a big difference," Sorensen says, sitting at a picnic table under a trellis hanging with grapevines. "It's that the egg carton is symbolic of him wanting to be true to this environmental passion and to be true to this environmental consciousness in every way he can."

Giller and Sorensen will soon face some new environmental challenges. Upstairs in the little house, the couple have set aside a room for a nursery, and if all goes well, their first child will be born next March. He and his wife want to view family life through the same green-tinted glasses they wear on a daily basis, making big decisions—like finding energy-efficient transportation, buying used clothing and toys, and making organic baby food—with the earth in mind, and trying, as Giller advises Grist's readers, not to sweat the small stuff.

He acknowledges that having a baby contradicts his sermon to friends about American children and consumption. And his growing family will inevitably affect Grist's content, perhaps inspiring columns about the trade-offs at the root of so many parenting decisions. Will he buy a minivan? Will he buy jarred baby food? Will he bribe his recalcitrant toddler one day with a brand-new plastic toy? Perhaps not. But those questions can only tie him more tightly to the daily dilemmas of Grist's readers.

"What we're trying to do with Grist, in part, is to connect the environment to people's lives," Giller says. Life can't merely be boiled down to whether or not your dryer is the most energy efficient, he says. "There's more to it than that." **E**

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