

Transcript for Honnie

Honnie is a Senior Energy Engineer for Elevate, a nonprofit that increases access to clean and affordable heat, power, and water for communities that have historically been under-invested in. Honnie works on a program that helps homeowners “electrify” their homes – meaning remove old fossil fuel appliances and replace them with efficient, electric appliances to save energy.

“I directly talk with residents during all stages of their involvement with the program, especially the electrification program. I do the assessments. And I really enjoy getting to know folks in the spaces they live and how they use their buildings, and their stories. It’s really really cool. We try to make it feel like it’s not a utility person coming to do work on your power or install internet. I like to try to educate the homeowners or building owners about the tests that I’m performing and actively get them engaged with those tests so that they can understand what it is we’re doing in their home, what those tests tell us, and how they can get an understanding for how they use power, how they could be using power or energy. And just get an understanding of okay, now I understand and now I understand how I can make it better.”

In addition to conducting home energy assessments and helping people enroll in these programs, Honnie works hard to help people understand how they use energy at home.

“I think first and foremost as with a lot of things, in order to know where you’re going you need to know where you’ve been. So understanding your current energy usage and the way that you use energy now is one of the most important things you can do especially when you need to compare it to after you recently have done retrofits or how you either reduce your energy or reduce consumption or implement a new measure like getting windows or insulation, to kind of help you understand the effects and the impacts of when you do those things.

A lot of people think that windows for instance are a big energy saver but when you think about how much windows cost, the return on that investment when you’re looking at the savings, isn’t really that big. Compared to when you’re looking at something like insulation or air sealing. And unfortunately when we’re going for energy efficiency measures, a lot of folks tend to gravitate towards getting windows or upgrading their current equipment first because it’s shiny and it’s something that you can see and that you can be proud about. And the things that you can’t see like air sealing and insulation are probably the best bang for your buck when you’re talking about energy efficiency and actually can reduce your energy usage by up to 20% in most buildings.”

Honnie works in the energy field, and she also has a personal connection to using and saving energy. She remembers learning about energy efficiency from her grandmother, a Mexican immigrant to the U.S.

“She always when we were younger, and I remember this so vividly in my head, she would in the summer hang her clothes out to dry despite having a dryer. We would always have the windows open when it was mild outside and we wouldn’t turn on the AC unless we really really needed to. Yeah she wouldn’t cook during the summer heavy meals to not heat the house up further and she just had – and that was my original experience to energy efficiency and energy reduction was her. So after she passed away, she passed away in 2003 due to cancer, and when I myself got my own first house in 2009 I, despite having a washer and dryer, would dry my clothes out on the line in the backyard and it just made me feel like she and I were connected in that way. And I’d like to think if she were here and knew the work I was doing and knew how I helped in communities that she was in-- Latina communities, Black and Brown communities—I’d like to hope that she’d be proud of me. And I really do this because of her to be honest.”

Like Honnie and her family, the way people use energy is often inspired by cultural practices and the daily routines they grew up with.

“Even myself, my husband and I still put up the plastic film on windows since it helps to reduce the draft. Not only is it something you can actually feel because you’re no longer feeling those cold drafts in the winter, but it’s something that’s helping you improve the air tightness in your home. As little as it does, it does actually reduce the energy that you waste because it prevents that conditioned air from leaving your house.”

Honnie earned her Master’s degree in engineering from Illinois Institute of Technology, where she discovered her passion for helping families learn how to reduce their energy use, specifically in communities and neighborhoods that have received less investment in the buildings.

“Part of the reason why I did my thesis on how to get old Chicagoland homes to reduce their energy by 50% was because I understood that the majority of people who owned such homes were people in Black and Brown communities and homeowners that are working more than one job or working on minimum wage, or just, they’re not wealthy. They can’t afford the energy conservation retrofits that could afford them to use less energy. It’s kind of like a vicious cycle.”

Research shows that even though white households have the highest levels of carbon emissions at home, compared to other groups in the U.S., Black households tend to have the highest energy bills. When energy bills are unaffordable to a family, that’s part of energy insecurity. Over half of Black families in the U.S. experience energy insecurity, compared to only about 20% of white families. Federal, state, and local policies are starting to focus on addressing these energy gaps.

“I think my perfect, well maybe not perfect—ideal solution would be to allocate funds and focus funds to helping old buildings achieve energy efficiency and then a lot of it is the decarbonization and electrification which is, as you may or may not know, shifts the cost of gas onto electricity. And currently electricity costs so much more than gas. And what we don’t want to do is we don’t want to leave folks who are already experiencing energy insecurity and financial burden because of it, even more financially

burdened because of the increased cost of electricity over gas. So giving a way for these community members and homeowners to tap into renewable energy sources such as community solar. I do believe that if we take care of the people that really and truly need these services the most, then everything else will fall into place. If we take care of our Black and Brown communities, then the pathway that we did to do that would work for everyone else right?”

Citations

<https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S2214629621004552?token=66A54D60C880AA0BC50412BB20941B3B4FD07D32318BEE77F3956AAD426C4BCB8DD85E814FEBD5B79B9CABC32F3D07A&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20220920191034>

<https://www.eia.gov/consumption/residential/data/2020/hc/pdf/HC%2011.1.pdf>