A light from above

PHOTOS BY JIM WEBER/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Wayne Goode with Inman Solar installs solar panels Tuesday afternoon on the roof of Buckman Hall at St. Agnes Academy and St. Dominic School. The panels and an accompanying sculpture at the school will honor the memory of Ryan Edwards, an environmentally conscious St. Dominic alumnus.

Solar array powered by late student's passion

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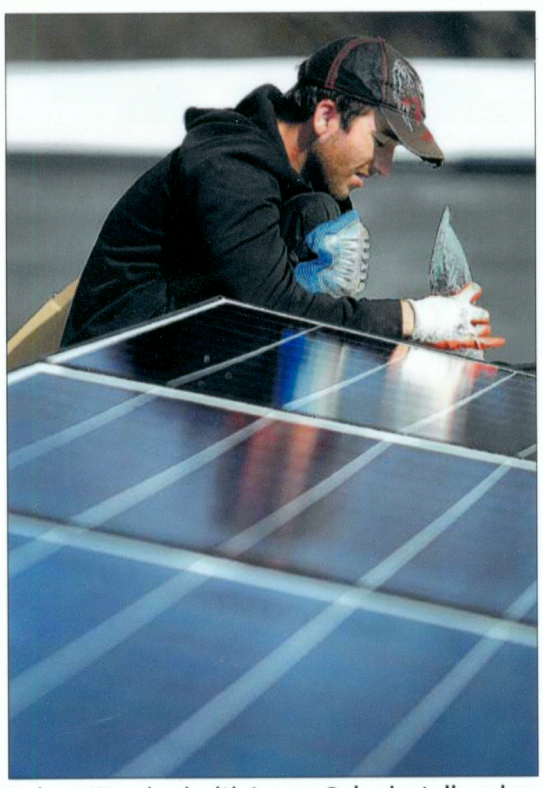
The 80 or so solar panels being lifted into place atop St. Agnes Academy/St. Dominic school should be humming away in a day or two, casting a warm glow on the life of Ryan Edwards, an alum who died in a spring break accident a year ago this month.

On the ground, students will be able to monitor the energy production on their rooftop in an energy kiosk taking shape in Buckman Hall.

"We will have a display in the hall that will show the energy output, and we'll talk about the environmental impact," said John Murphy, St. Dominic dean and force of nature. "I think the interesting fact is we will be positively impacting the environment, the same as removing three automobiles from the road."



Robert Woodard with Inman Solar installs solar panels on the roof of Buckman Hall on Tuesday afternoon. The panels will reduce carbon emissions by 14 tons.

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Beside the kiosk will be a sculpture by Memphis artist and St. Dominic parent Landon Despeaux made of reclaimed objects in honor of Edwards, a 2003 graduate of St. Dominic and an environmental education major at the University of Tennessee. He died as a result of a diving accident. He was 24.

Murphy had been looking into solar for a couple of years. When it became a way to to honor Edwards, aka "Cardboard Eddie," the pieces for the Ryan Edwards

See SOLAR, 2B

SOLAR
from **1B**

Solar Initiative came together, he said, many pressed in place by families at St. Agnes/St. Dominic.

"A graduate of ours at the University of Penn started doing research and found we had a parent who owned a solar company," Murphy said. "He connected us. I didn't know, even though they were right underneath my nose."

The bulk of the donations was raised by Edwards' father, Dr. Scott Edwards, a Memphis dentist who several years ago put solar panels on his 6250 Poplar office because Ryan told him it was a good idea.

"I was going to put the panels on the back so no one would see them. 'Dad,' he said, 'they have to face south. One day people will come to you as a new patient because you have solar panels.' I laughed and laughed. It was the craziest thing I have ever heard.

"Now, we get a referral a month because of the solar panels. He was right. He was so into the solar deal that when John (Murphy) told me they wanted to set up a little display run by solar power, I said let's think big and see what happens. It's the easiest money I have ever had to raise."

Dozens of people contributed to the fundraiser, which kicked off last fall. In several months, the fund had $65,000.

"We'll be generating 17 kilowatts, enough to run all of the lights in the science building," Murphy said. "We'll put the power on the grid. We worked with MLGW and TVA. We'll get a meter that will run in the opposite direction, which means you are producing power. You become an energy producer."

The investment is expected to pay for itself in 13 years.

When Murphy brought up the idea of solar the first time several years ago, "some of the more business-minded people on the board said we can make better money in the market by investing the money," Murphy said. "Even those people saw it very much a mission-driven project."

Ryan Edwards was known as "cardboard Eddie" around Knoxville because he worked the graveyard shift (6:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m.) driving a campus recycling truck.

"He saw it as an opportunity to do it for a year and go to school," Edwards said. "Knoxville is so much further ahead recycling-wise than Memphis. It is a profit center. He doubled the number of stops and tripled the amount of cardboard they were picking up."

The route became so well known that kids needing to do community service were allowed to ride along and help Cardboard Eddie. "I still can't believe his boss allowed him so much flexibility," Edwards said.

On Earth Day, April 22, the school will dedicate the solar panels and remember the student who inspired the glow.

"We like to believe that what is causing all this to come together is Ryan up in heaven," said Barbara Daush, school president. "He is the reason we have such a spirit and such a feeling of accomplishment for this. Now, he is watching over us from heaven. That is what we believe.

"... People came from all walks of life to be part of this. All the pieces fit together just perfectly. It just worked."