

# SUSTAINABILITY

## Q&A with Blake Jones, president of Namasté Solar

by Marissa Hermanson



**B**lake Jones, president and co-founder of Namasté Solar here in Boulder, just returned from the one-year anniversary celebration of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) at the White House with President Obama. Jones is paving the way for solar energy in Boulder County and is influencing the nation's agenda with alternative energy. Jones told Boulder Weekly all about hanging at the White House, the benefits of being an employee-owned company, and how Namasté is involved locally and nationally.

**BW:** What is your background with alternative energy?

**Blake:** I actually got my start as a civil engineer working in the oil and gas industry for Halliburton. Six years later, after a life-changing epiphany, I moved to Nepal and worked there for three years implementing solar, hydro, wind and electric vehicle technologies. I learned an amazing amount about different types of renewable energy, particularly solar electricity, and then brought my newfound knowledge back to the USA in late 2004 to co-found Namasté Solar.

**BW:** Has it always been employee-owned?

**Blake:** Yes, we've always been 100 percent employee-owned, and hopefully we always will be. When we started the company, the three co-founders all shared the same vision for creating a new type of company — one that was managed democratically, maintained 100 percent transparency with all of its information and operations, and provided all employees with an equal opportunity to purchase stock in the company. We currently have 47 employee-owners with no majority owner and no external investors.

**BW:** Why is Namasté employee-owned? What are the benefits of this?

**Blake:** We believe in sharing the entire experience of small business ownership — not just the rewards and control, but also the responsibility and accountability. When everyone thinks and acts like an owner, amazing things happen. The quality of our work, the pride and passion we inject into everything we do and the sincere care and concern that we provide to our customers are a testament to how well employee-ownership works. We think that our employee-owned business model is the secret to our success, and we believe that our competitors simply can't match what a group of dedicated people who all feel true ownership for their company

can do. Not only can our customers see the difference, but we have an employee-owner retention rate of more than 97 percent, which is impressive in the rapidly expanding and adolescent solar industry, where veterans are rare, valuable and coveted ... and where employee pirating is rampant as a result.

**BW:** How is Namasté paving the way for alternative energy — specifically solar energy — in Boulder County and nationally?

**Blake:** We've been actively involved in two important areas: education and policy. Our relatively small business is unique in that we have multiple team members whose full-time roles are dedicated to these two areas. Many people still don't understand how solar energy works or how accessible it is for them. We're helping to increase public awareness by putting solar right in the spotlight at center stage. We're also actively involved in promoting solar-friendly policies at the local, state and national level, as this is the only way we'll overcome our addiction to subsidized fossil fuels and get to where we need to go — to the greener pastures of the future, where we have a balanced energy portfolio fueled by renewable energy.

**BW:** Boulder County is situated for growth in the solar energy industry. What does that mean for Namasté?

**Blake:** I think it means that our white-knuckling roller coaster ride is only just beginning! We've been growing so fast — we were ranked as the 56th fastest growing private company in the country by Inc magazine in 2009, for having grown more than 2,250 percent over the previous four years — and I expect this kind of growth to continue. Solar energy still provides far less than one percent of our nation's energy needs, so we've truly only scratched the surface.

**BW:** What sectors does Namasté provide solar power for — industrial? Commercial? Residential? What projects around Boulder County has Namasté been involved in?

**Blake:** We design and install solar electric systems for residential, commercial, government and nonprofit customers, and I'd say that about half of our work last year was residential. We've been involved in some high-profile, ground-breaking and very fun projects with prominent partners throughout Boulder County. (See [www.namastesolar.com](http://www.namastesolar.com) to view Namasté's Boulder Country projects.)

**BW:** Are you involved with ClimateSmart?

**Blake:** We were among the many dedicated citizens and organizations that helped work on House Bill 1350 in 2008, which allowed counties to implement their own Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) programs. We also participated in the "Yes!A Campaign Committee" to help pass the Yes!A initiative in November 2008, which made the ClimateSmart Loan program possible. Today, we continue to be participants in ClimateSmart — or continue to be beneficiaries is more accurate — because many of our residential customers have been able to purchase solar PV systems from us as a direct result of the ClimateSmart Loan Program.

**BW:** When was your trip to D.C. to visit President Obama? Why were you invited and what was the purpose of the visit? What was discussed?

**Blake:** I was honored to be invited by the President to come to the White House last month to help celebrate the one-year anniversary of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA). He invited me because, one year prior, I got to introduce the president before he signed the ARRA. I also got to give him and the vice president a tour of the solar electric system we installed at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, where the event was held. It was great to meet him again and thank him for his leadership in helping to make renewable and clean energy technologies a national priority.

**BW:** Was this your first trip to the White House?

**Blake:** Actually, this was my second trip, but it was just as fun and exciting as the first trip. Last year, just a few weeks after the ARRA-signing event in Denver, the First Lady invited me to attend the president's first speech to joint Congress with her. When I found out I was invited to come to the White House again this year, my wife jokingly said, "Wow, you're getting to have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the second time!" And she was right — both visits were unforgettable. 